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WEBSITE AS A MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOL

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ABSTRACT

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<p>This study explores the role that contents, visual elements and aesthetics plays in the use of university websites as a marketing communication tool. The focus of this study is on establishing if visual content and aesthetics could influence student decision to consider and attend any specific university. The study was motivated by the growing interests in how some Finnish universities of Applied Sciences can compete in the face of introduction of tuition fees in Finnish institutions of higher learning. Entirely qualitative in content, this study examines the framework for accessing website quality: web accessibility, web usability, web attractiveness, web credibility, web controllability, web efficiency, web helpfulness and web learnability. The results obtained from this research revealed the need for universities to have attractive and clearly understood webpages with readily navigable information on such characteristics such as programs, course offerings. location, tuition and scholarships. Results also revealed that a good website can influence the decision of prospective student.</p>		

<p>Key words Aesthetics, Contents, Higher education institutions, Visual elements, Websites, Marketing communication tool.</p>

**ABSTRACT
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1 INTRODUCTION

Internet is radically changing the traditional way that organizations interact with the public. For organizations, the web gives access to a large audience and improves operational efficiency. Websites are becoming key components of an organization's survival in the globalized competition. The website represents an organization, communicating an organization's culture, values, and vision. The website acts as a delivery mechanism for service that facilitate various tasks a stakeholder needs to perform. The website also serves as a platform through which an organization can interact with its stakeholders.

Organizational websites have different purposes, designs and implementations that indicate their focus or priority. The value an organization attaches to a website is reflected in the operations and content of the website. University web sites are no exception. The university website is not only a cost efficient and timely method to communicate with various stakeholders such as students, faculty, administrative staff and visitors it is also a way for a university to shape its image. Universities need to do everything within their power to keep positive images with their various constituents, and one way to do this is to make use of the opportunities website presents.

Knowing how to reach and ultimately connect with prospective students is a primary responsibility of marketing and admissions departments at all institutions of higher education. Admissions offices are challenged to evaluate their recruitment practices under the increased use of online communication and social media. The rapid growth of technology and easy access to online resources for many students and parents has dramatically reduced dependence on traditional forms of media, yielding a demand for change in the recruitment process.

College and university websites play a vital role in this process. A university home page is a gateway to information that can regularly assist future/current students and their parents. Meticulous attention to detail in the content arrangement and aesthetics of the home page is therefore crucial. It is widely popular in university website creation to add relevant information about the school and its offerings. In fact, most of these home pages are designed specifically for the targeted students and their parents. For example, the homepage of Lapland university of Applied Sciences has undergone a major redesign in order to make the page more recruitment oriented with useful information for prospective students.

Some higher education institutions have incorporated modern design styles to their websites, featuring large photographic banners and improved on information accessibility on the website by providing a user-friendly navigation system. Seamk University of Applied Sciences provides an excellent example of an institution which pays great attention to both enhancement of visual elements (including high-resolution photography) and user-friendly site navigation for optimum functionality. Using high-resolution photography on home page banners is known to generate interest and captivate the visitor (Bordbar 2016, 5- 8.). High-resolution visual elements provide a far more memorable, immediately understandable message and clarity of message in web presentation.

Available research on how the contents of a website affects an applicant's college choice shows students trust a professionally designed website more and find it more credible for accessing information (Youngblood 2013, 11-12.) The credibility perception of a website greatly affects a user's interest in the contents of website and consequently, users tend to spend longer sessions on the site and access more information. The use of aesthetics and high-resolution visual elements like colour, texture, text formatting, graphics, lines and icons increases the credibility of a website. Recent researches have shown that judgements on website credibility are based on the overall aesthetics of a website and that a professionally designed website wins people's credibility points. This point is appreciated when observing that web users tend to appreciate the professional appeal of a website when deciding which site to select for the same information and services.

Higher education institutions have started to create marketing communication strategies which directly involve the website content and especially the redesign of their institution homepage (Halvorsen, 2014). These strategies help convey various rhetorical messages for visitors (Bordbar, 2016, 5-8.) Usage of both textual and graphic designs/photography in websites plays a large role in creating a site that gains aesthetic interest and continues to provide better information to the targeted audience.

Institutional websites provide information to users such as staff, prospective students, incoming students and students; allow contact with the university through feedback; and advertises programs or courses for interested people. There are many other uses such as online surveys that websites can be put to. The website also serves as one of the most important marketing communication tools for higher education institution to interact and communicate with their clients.

Recently, researchers have responded to calls for additional research on the use of the website as a marketing communication tool by investigating conditions that may facilitate effective use of the website as a marketing tool.

Despite these recent research efforts on the subject matter, however, a fundamental gap in the website recruitment literature remains. Namely, while previous studies have examined the correlates of recruitment website features using cross-sectional designs, researchers have not empirically demonstrated that viewers' choice of institution selection can be changed by viewing the institution's website.

In the wake of 2016, The Finnish parliament passed a new regulation to introduce tuition fees for non-European union students studying in higher education institutions in Finland. The tuition fees policy will take effect from the fall of 2017 academic session. Before the introduction of tuition fees, Finnish universities, especially the University of Applied Sciences have enjoyed relatively little traditional competition because education was free in all of these universities, irrespective of the size or location. With this development, higher education institutions in Finland will all be pushed to use marketing and other business methods to sell higher education and increase enrolment in institutions.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore the effectiveness of web content, visual elements and aesthetics in the use of website as a marketing communication tool. Efforts would be made to determine the effectiveness of the case universities web contents, visual elements, and aesthetics in their image perception of the school and the extent to what degree did this influenced student's choice in admission/college selection process. The study on the general level examines the importance of a good website in higher education marketing.

This research has largely focused on website design features and content-related variables that influence applicants' perceptions of a university image and reputation, and by extension influence applicant's admission pursuit intentions.

2 WEBSITE MARKETING COMMUNICATION

This chapter presents website as a marketing communication tool and the focus here is on how higher education institution uses their webpages to communicate their offerings to the target audience. First, the chapter brings up internet marketing communication objectives, and then analyze the framework for accessing website quality

2.1 Marketing communications on internet

The web is the primary information source and outlet for millions of people in today's connected world. The university website is highly focused at informing and engaging both current and prospective students, but it also provides outward facing messaging and information to the community at large. The university website serves a broad audience, but the main goal is providing students with information about the university like course information, event calendars, tuition fees, university research and so on.

Corporate presence on the internet is now a necessity. Marketing on the internet has brought more opportunities for companies to approach their customers. As global competition intensifies, an organization's performance and strategic positioning will become more dependent upon its ability to successfully exploit information technologies. Abrahamsson & Lundgren (2004) opine that companies could enhance their sales and marketing efforts by being on the internet. Internet could also widen an organization's circle of influence by providing yet another way to communicate with its clients, prospects and the public (Abrahamsson & Lundgren, 2004, 27-29).

The Internet and web have created a new way to communicate and have real-time interactions. Nowadays, the internet, particularly the websites have become popular for firms to introduce their products and services. Companies worldwide are recognizing the World Wide Web as a valuable addition to their "tool box" of advertising media (Sheehan & Doherty, 2004, 117-124). Statistics shows that the internet has about twelve per cent of world advertising market share in 2010 with internet ad spending reaching USD 24 billion. The level of spending is estimated to reach USD 64 billion by 2018.

The internet has become an important commercial medium and marketing environment, where people, companies and governments are jumping on the internet faster than they acquire any other new communications medium (Abrahamsson & Lundgren, 2004, 27-29.) Internet usage continues to grow and internet users value the medium as a better tool to learn about products and services (Sheehan & Doherty, 2004). In the years 2000 to 2008, the number of internet users has increased by 4 times from about 361 million to more than 1.46 billion, in which Asia, the continent with the biggest population accounts for 39.5% of world internet users (Abrahamsson & Lundgren, 2004, 21.)

Being on the internet can be advantageous to the company if there is a proper implementation and control of the effort. Therefore, it is imperative for marketers and advertising agency personnel to put search for ways to direct online users to their web pages and provide a strong communication message to them once they visit (Abrahamsson & Lundgren, 2004, 27-29.) Advertising on the web needs to be in line with what the company promotes offline, so that the customers are not confused about the image of the company (Abrahamsson & Lundgren, 2004, 27-29.) Integrated marketing communication is one good way to go about this because every marketing communication messages will originate from the same concept. If everything originates from the same concept, the web page will be in line with what the company communicate offline (Abrahamsson & Lundgren, 2004, 25-26.)

The growth and acceptance of internet as an important source of information has challenged marketers to integrate web into their marketing communication mix. A corporate website has the potential to communicate all the elements of the marketing communication mix and to allow a seamless link between a customer and a product. According to Plamer (2002) a website has the ability to reach and communicate with several different target audiences, such as customers, media, employees and other stakeholders. The internet and the World Wide Web are nothing but a totally new and unique marketing medium (Hoffman & Novak 1997, 5-7).

2.2 Objectives of marketing communications on internet

One important issue that is often raised by researchers with the use of website as a marketing communication tool that is the objective meant to achieved, since the objectives could serve as a benchmarking tool when companies are in the process of measuring the effects of the website.

According to Cornier (1999) the following are the objectives of a website:

Marketing goods and services to customers whom may not otherwise come in contact with the company.

The internet has broken geographical limitations in marketing therefore potential customers from all over the world could reach the company through the website (Cornier, 1999, 17.)

Establishing new communication tools for existing customers;

Organizations may post product information, special offers, company newsletter and email addresses for customers to send their comments, request or inquiries. Internet gives the organization an opportunity to provide information to potential and existing customers 24 hours a day and seven days a week (Cornier, 1999, 17.)

Establishing corporate image and brand identity

It has been argued that a website is a reflection of the organization itself. The website has the opportunity to attract and maintain customers, or instantly turn someone off. Competitors are only a click away on the internet so the website design must be carefully and well thought out. Replacing manual tasks and in-house procedures with interactive and informative alternatives on the website (Cornier, 1999, 17.)

An organization for example may include frequently asked questions (FAQs) section on its website to minimize the number of incoming telephone inquiries. If properly designed to accommodate customers' needs, a website can also decrease the numbers of letters, faxes and telephone calls for customers support department. Thus, the overhead and other cost are reduced for the organization (Cornier, 1999, 17.)

The website also acts as an advertising medium and interactive brochure;

Advertising on the internet is similar to advertising through any other medium as the intent is to communicate the message clearly and create an interest to move the viewer to further action. The website is an interactive brochure, providing information about their companies, the product or services they offer, the contact information (Cornier, 1999, 17.)

Customer service tool

Available research on website as a marketing communication tool shows that about sixteen per cent of companies or organizations uses World Wide Web as a way to provide help and services to their customers. Businesses often take customer questions and/or service order online and provide detailed answers within 24 hours. Some anticipated questions in advance and provide lists of frequently asked questions (FAQs) online

2.2.1 Website target audience

No other medium provides as many audience measure as the internet. This is because there are many things to measure and the fact that industries are still trying to figure out an appropriate audience measure. The existence of a good audience measure is critical to the success of the web as an advertising medium. Advertising is expensive; hence, it is important for marketers to be sure who their audiences are. However, by using the web as an advertising medium, it is extremely difficult to identify if it has reached the audience considering the factors targeting which are demographic, geographic and psychographic. When choosing the audience to target is determined by the marketing objectives. The marketers within the company must consider the fact that it is crucial to select the right audiences and this should be decided by looking at what product or service the company is offering (Strauss & Raymond 1999, 37.)

2.2.2 Evaluation of the effectiveness of the website as marketing communication tool

There exist several quantitative parameters to measure a website success which all gives the organization an idea on how well they manage to attract traffic to their website (Lindstrom & Andersen 1999, 4.) Lindstrom and Andersen (1999) listed the following quantitative measurement tools of a website. These are:

The number of repeated visits;

This parameter shows to what extent the site was able to live up to the expectations of the user. If the user needs for information, entertainment and communication have been sustained, it is likely that they will visit the site repeatedly (Lindstrom & Andersen 1999, 4.)

The number of minutes spent by the user;

The longer the visitors spend at the website, the greater the probability that strong relationships are being built between the user and the brand. The measurement should also include the amount of time the visitor spends per page, since that is the measurement to increase dialogue with the user (Lindstrom & Andersen 1999, 4.)

The number of minutes the visitor spends on average on the main activities on the website;
For instance, if two out of three pages in a main activity of the site has generated long visits but not the third, it is likely to assume that the creativity has come to a halt, rather than the user's interest in the subject itself (Lindstrom & Andersen 1999, 4.)

The number of individual visitors;

This parameter can give an indication of how successful the external communication has been in promoting traffic on the website. Generally, web address that is easy for the potential user to remember also tends to increase the number of individual visitors (Lindstrom & Andersen 1999, 4.)

The user's behavior on the website;

This parameter measures which activities on the site that were visited first and in what order the subsequent visits were selected and if this is in accordance with the messages and the values originally intended by the site owner (Lindstrom & Andersen 1999, 4.)

The website's sales and income;

If the website is design for promote sales, it is important that goal should be set for sales and the rate of sales and the income (Lindstrom & Andersen 1999, 4.)

2.3 Designing a website

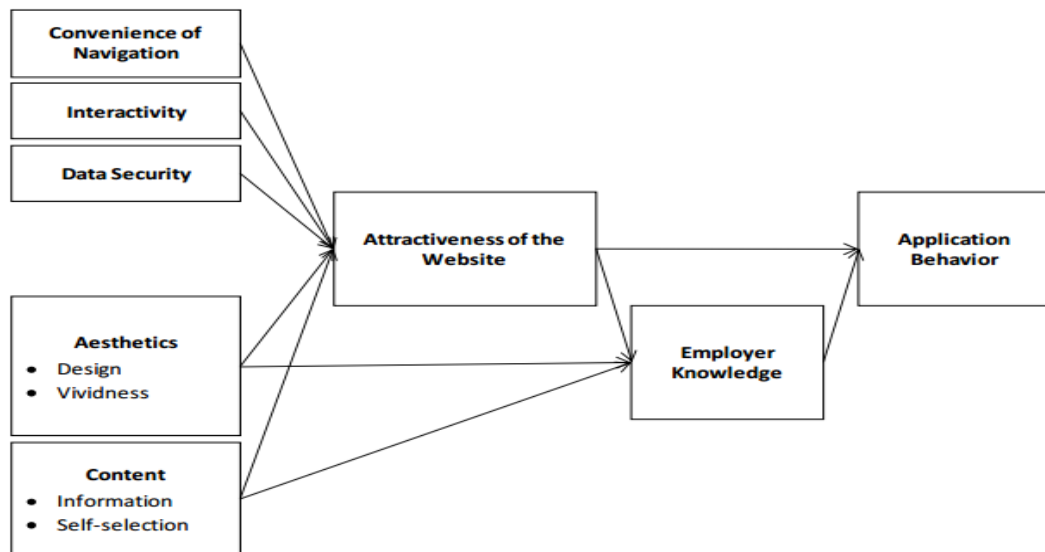
Every organization needs a website today. The website has to show what the organization is about and it must also reflect its quality. Therefore, when designing a website, the design must primarily focus on the organization's goals. The website must be made to reflect the organization's message and not just trying to utilize the newest flashes and tricks. Designers require extensive skills of graphic effects and visual symbols so that their communication communicates the organization message. Visitors to a Website does not find it appealing to use a slow loading website being bogged-down with too much of high-tech everything. Customers are seeking quality information, not some fancy show time. The information on the homepage has to be clear and easy to understand. It has to give an easy passage to other pages and contain good information (Plamer 2002, 127).

In designing the web, choosing suitable visuals provides the dual benefit of conveying the right message to the right audience as well as creating a strong and emotional connection with the viewers. Linda Scott describes in her article, “Rhetoric is an interpretive theory that frames a message as an interested party’s attempt to influence an audience. The sender’s intention is understood to be manifest in the argument, the evidence, the order of argumentation, and the style of delivery” (Scott 2008, 193-203.) Setting up the web page with interesting, bold, and attractive images attracts and engages viewers and builds a powerful emotional connection with the web audience.

Informational websites such as a higher education institution website has to pay more attention to the functionality of the web than aesthetics since the primary focus is to provide information for the users. The term “functionality” in this context refers to user friendly aspects of interfaces and Human Computer Interactions (HCI), where the main objective is to create effective websites where the user quickly and efficiently can obtain the desired pieces of information without being delayed by long downloading times or blind alleys when navigating on the site (Bordbar 2016, 7- 8.)

The functionality of a website is defined by usability, accessibility and credibility of the site. Research shows that educators in the area of web design are trying to teach students the importance of web usability and accessibility as well as aesthetics. “Faculty need to balance teaching students the basic building blocks, such as HTML and CSS, with teaching students visual design and design best practices, particularly usability and accessibility” (Youngblood 2013, 11-12.) A functional website is the one that users, including users with disabilities could easily find information and it is more credible and trustworthy when it is professionally designed with accurate information.

In designing the web, another crucial thing to consider is user-friendliness. If the information is made hard to find, users will leave the site immediately. Creating a user-friendly navigation system and organizing the information into a meaningful hierarchy are important components of designing an easy-to-use website (Youngblood 2013, 12.) Available researches on website designs shows that poor usability damage the overall credibility of a site, which results in the loss of user trust on the website content.



Web component

GRAPH 1 (Adapted from the work of Cornier 1999)

2.4 Organization website and search engine optimization

Organization websites should offer visitors a positive user experience in that they are clearly structured, easy to navigate and optimized for different devices, such as small mobile screens and large PC monitors. Of course, websites need to include relevant and interesting contents, so that people actually search for them; and most important: it should be easy to find the website (Youngblood 2013, 12).

Optimizing the website for easy search is the key. Given that there are more than a billion websites on the world-wide-web today, the hope to be found easily is often in vain. Thus, organizations that do nothing else but hope potential customers may find their websites, remain in the stone age of digital marketing. Consequently, most organizations engage in activities aimed at improving the chances that people browsing the internet will actually locate their website. The umbrella term for different measures that can be set to improve the visibility of a website is search engine optimization. Besides including as many links and back-links to other sites as possible, this term primarily refers to the use of appropriate meta-tags to increase the chances to be identified by search engines like Google, Baidu or Yahoo (Youngblood 2013, 12).

2.5 Framework for accessing website quality

Accessibility of the web speaks to the ease in the use of a website by users especially users with disabilities including vision, hearing, cognition and motor skill impairments. A website should be easily and equally accessible for users with disabilities. When a website lacks these considerations in its design, it becomes difficult to use and thus undesirable for this population of web users (Youngblood 2013, 12.) The power of the web is in its universality. Access by everyone is an essential aspect of a good website. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) announced the launch of the International Program Office (IPO) for the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) to promote and achieve web functionality for people with disabilities.

The usability of websites has traditionally been defined as the perceived ease with which applicants can access desired information from a website (Youngblood 2013, 12.) While colours, image, and layout are all important elements of a website's aesthetics, there are also functional elements that are equally important. For example, page load time can either encourage a visitor to keep navigating or frustrate them enough to leave. Error messages, broken links, and underdeveloped pages are equally problematic. With websites, increasingly being viewed on mobile devices, it is also vital to ensure that website is mobile-optimized.

While research on website as a marketing communication tool is still in its infancy, several studies have examined the effect of website usability on viewers' university's impression. According to Braddy & Wuensch, (2003) the ease of navigation a university's website was related to positive general impressions of the admitting university under investigation. Similarly, Cober (2003) demonstrated that favorable usability perceptions were associated with applicants' increased inclinations to start a degree program with a university and to recommend a prospective institution to their friends.

Finally, Thoms, Chinn, Goodrich & Howard (2004) investigated the effects of system speed and website user-friendliness on admission applicants' evaluations of university's image after these applicants completed the admission and selection processes implemented by these institutions. Results revealed that both usability variables were moderately positively correlated with admissions seekers' university image evaluations. Additional research investigating the effects of website usability on university's attractiveness (Williamson, Lepak & King 2003, 242-263.) and satisfaction with website use (Plamer 2002, 151-167.) have been similarly supportive.

Colours and logos chosen on the website have a tremendous impact on website attractiveness and the site user's emotional response. Like colour, images can also greatly influence how a visitor responds to the website. Obviously, images need to resonate with the target market. The images need to be high quality photos or graphics to create a positive impact. Prior research has examined the importance of attractiveness websites in university admission process by looking at a variety of dimensions, such as colors, fonts, layouts, pictures, and type of text (Thoms 2004, 150-157) for example, exposed admission applicants to three websites that varied in terms of their appeal and found that applicants preferred to study with university that maintained the website with the most appealing colors, fonts, and pictures.

In addition, Thompson, Braddy & Wuensch (2004) found that job seekers' evaluations of aesthetic features (e.g., color) of two universities' websites chosen from eight Ivy League colleges which are considered as best institution of higher learning to study at. Lists were positively associated with their admission pursuit intentions and their willingness to recommend these universities to a friend. Additional studies examining the role of website appeal have also found appeal to be positively correlated with people's overall impressions of websites (Braddy & Wuensch 2004; Schenkman & Jonsson, 2000), their ratings of university attractiveness, and their intentions to seek admission into the university in question that maintain these websites (Thoms et al. 2004, 1031-1042.)

In a study done by Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Standord, & Tauber (2003), 2,684 people evaluated the credibility of two live websites on a similar topic (health). The results show that many participants make judgments about the credibility of websites based on the site's design, including layout, typography, font size, and color scheme. "When evaluating the credibility of a website, participants commented on the design look of the site more often than any other website feature, with 46.1% of the comments addressing the design look in some way" (Fogg, et al. 2003, 5.)

Additional sources support the link between credibility and usability of a website. "Credibility influences a user's interest in a website. Once users perceive the credibility of a website they will be more likely to use it" (Alsudani & Casey 2009, 1.) The role of aesthetics in the credibility of a website is examined in Alsudani and Casey's study based on user judgment. Participants in this study commented on the overall unity of design for website credibility. A unity web design can be achieved by a close relationship between harmony, balance, contrast/dominance and color of all the content. "Making 'Unity' in home page design affects users' judgments on web credibility, as home pages that achieve 'Unity' in their design are considered to be more credible than others that lack 'Unity' in their design" (Alsudani & Casey 2009,

6.) Users tend to trust the credibility of a website that is designed more professionally in comparison to one that shows no indication of clean and professional design.

Web Controllability speaks to the degree of control a person has over his/her interaction with a particular website. In other words, controllability is whether users feel that they are in control of the software product. If a site is well on controllability the users most probably feel they can navigate around it with ease and do the things they want to do. Poor controllability of a website usually means a poorly organized site that disrupts the way they normally expect to do things (Alsudani & Casey 2009, 6.)

According to International Organization for Standardization (ISO) efficiency refers to the resources used in completing a task (ISO,1998). Website efficiency as a representation of resources expended in relation to achieving goals while visiting a website (Peters 2001, 8-10.) The users perceive efficiency when they can achieve goals with a quick visit without putting forth much cognitive effort. When site users give, a high efficiency rating they feel they can quickly locate and do what is of interest to them in an effective and economical manner. They feel that the web site responds at a reasonable speed. Disorientation, or the tendency to lose one's sense of location in a Web site, can cause users to become frustrated, lose interest, and experience a measurable decline in efficiency.

Peters (2001) argues that helpfulness is the key to web success. Finding ways to help users for every step of their visit: before they reach the site, during their visit, and after the visit play a crucial role on the usability. A website which is high on helpfulness corresponds with the users' expectations about its content and structure. A site with a low level of helpfulness can be misleading about its layout and content.

In order to achieve the best efficiency and effectiveness possible while using a device, users must first learn how to interact with the device. Learnability is related to achieving a sufficient level of competence with the device to be able to complete goals in an efficient and effective manner. The ease, in time or effort, with which users can learn a device, is its learnability. Learnability or the ease with which the features required for achieving particular goals can be mastered. It is the capability of the software product to enable users to feel that they can productively use the software product right away and then quickly learn other new (for them) functionalities. There are numerous studies that identify learnability as a key attribute of the usability. In websites with high learnability users feel they are able to start using the site with the minimum of introductions and everything is easy to understand from the start. In the websites

with low learnability users feel that the site may be using concepts or terminologies which are unfamiliar and need more explanation (Dumont & Frindte 2005, 73-83).

2.6 Visual communication

We communicate visually all the time; we do not have to visit an art gallery or read an art/design book to experience visual communication. We use visual communication to navigate and understand the world. In visual communication, basic elements work together to form the principles of all visual communication. These basic elements include but are not limited to line, shape, color, volume, texture, tone and proportion. “Visual communication has been used since the birth of human civilization: to reveal the mystic, to illustrate the complicated, to explain the complex, and to shed light on the dark (Matusitz 2005, 97-112.) Research shows that people learn and remember more accurately when information is presented to them visually. Recent research supports the idea that visual communication can be more powerful than verbal communication, suggesting in many instances that people learn and retain information that is presented to them visually much better than that which is only provided verbally.

Visual communication has played an important role in evolving universities and colleges into what they are today and to plan for a better future. “The major claim of visual communication is one influence of our technological culture. Books are out of date while hypertext is trendsetting and in vogue. Students do not go from one page to the next anymore. Rather, they navigate on the Internet and go through hyperlinks” (Matusitz, 2005, 97-112) Today, students navigate on Internet and use hyperlinks for getting information. Not only the form of communication need to be faster, but also the structure of presentation needs to be different to challenge the current body of students.

2.7 Recruiting prospective students in higher education institutions

The market in which higher institutions operate is characterized by an increasingly competitive environment among universities to inform, remind and persuade potential applicants to select and apply their degree programmes. More so, prospective students constituting the target market of higher institutions are characterized by internet savvies with good communication skills, better informed and prepare to take decision. This underscores the important role marketing plays in recruiting and retaining students and its overall importance in the higher education sector.

The importance of using Internet for marketing and promotional purposes by universities and colleges becomes more and more apparent as technology moves forward in a rapid pace. As universities are targeting potential students through the use of technology and the Web, prospective students are also searching the Web for the right college. The primary aim of marketing is to affect perception of value and behavior through directed communication. The website as a marketing communication tool must share to prospective student elements which they may seek to know about appropriate programme of study and what an institution offers (Strauss & Raymond 1999, 9).

The university website is often the first reference point for a student when researching the right selection of courses and an institution. In the study conducted by Alsudani and Casey in 2009, their study suggest that university website cater to prospective applicants by using verbal and visual imagery to engage student populations. Because websites tend to be the first choice for getting information for applicants, it is expedient to view university websites as relevant artifacts of language and communication crucial to researching about the institution. University websites have served as subjects of research in various studies. For example, a research conducted found that university websites were effective in providing useful information for students; however, they could improve features that promote more dialogic, two-way interactions between students and the institutions (Alsudani & Casey 2009, 152).

From a marketing perspective, websites could be seen as promotional outlets set in place in order to achieve a business or organizational goal. Some website scholars explain that all website communication has an ultimate goal: to achieve a positive response action from every visitor. Positive response actions could mean a visitor remaining on the website for an optimum period, downloading content from the site, forwarding content to another person, purchasing an item, subscribing for more information, or returning to the website at a later time. When higher education institutions subscribe to this theory, they should strive to engage visitors so they would use the website for information apply to a study program or share the information with other people interested in the studying at the school (Poock 2006, 785-790).

With the advancement in information and communication technologies, people spent more time on the Web. In today's world, the centerpiece of any successful program is an interactive website designed specifically for the targeted audience the company is seeking to reach. In same vein, higher education institutions have similar ideas as business industry has. According to Williamson (2003, 270-271), university web sites have developed almost as rapidly as corporate websites. In his research, Plamer (2002,

172-173) similarly observed that 81 per cent of university marketing faculty reported creating and maintaining individual. There are large number of students who are considering attending colleges, and colleges in turn need to market themselves effectively to attract the students they want most (Williamson, et al. 2003, 242-263.) In the past, competition for students was limited among higher education institutions and the internet was not a factor in how students researched and selected colleges that they might attend.

Today, potential students have a very specific expectation of information they can find online from colleges. Students are seeking a list of degrees offered, academic program details, and cost of attendance. If this information is hard to find, unclear, or is part of a poorly designed web site, candidates will likely remove the college from their list of potential institutions that they might attend (Williamson et al. 2003, 242-263).

As a result of instant access to important information through the internet search engines, prospective students online view colleges, decreasing face-to-face interactions between the college and prospective students. These anonymous potential students may proceed through most of the admissions steps from a distance and many even prefer to apply electronically and avoid direct interactions with admissions staff. However, students, be it current or prospective are looking for easy-to-find information and anything else is deemed annoying. The results from Pooch (2006) suggest that information on the homepage should be easy to follow and organized in one place that does not require unnecessary scrolling. "Homepages that do require scrolling down either have too much information or not well organized" (Pooch 2006, 785-790).

2.8 Web contents using information needs

Many literatures have proposed a number of factors that may be used to assess website architecture, including HTML size, download time, image size, number of images, homepage size, number and sizes of fonts, navigation tools, number of colours and screen length (Matusitz et al. 2005, 97-112). However, only a web a link research has been formalized and used to measure the relevance of website content. It is not clear if the literature has established any other definite method for assessing web content beyond the initial efforts Gomes & Murphy (2003). It may be contended that website users' primary aim is to get relevant content, while good architecture is used to help users to navigate through web content. This makes a website content analysis crucial. However, the limited research on website content evaluation

in the literature may be understandable, as there are no formal specifications as to what should constitute the contents of websites (Gomes & Murphy 2003, 116-125).

Since websites have been described as analogue of books in web link and citation research (Peters 2001, 17); it follows that website contents can also be evaluated for their quality and relevance in the same way as book contents are evaluated in citation and collection management using users' information needs as the yardstick. Yusof, Khaw, Hui & Neow (2010) described how citation analysis can be used for content analysis and to evaluate the impact of academic works. Caglar & Mentis (2012) offered insights into how both superficial and in-depth content analyses can be carried out on books and journals to ascertain their coverage, quality and relevance and the extent to which they can meet users' information needs. (Caglar & Mentis 2012. 9-10.) Dumont and Frindte's (2005) work on the contents of home pages of websites owned by psychologists is a typical example of web content analysis using users' information needs to determine the relevance of web content.

The literature on information needs can thus be adopted to develop a framework for research on website content. Research on information needs has established that people's status, social involvements, assignments, economic and health needs determine the situations that arise in the course of their lives and what they need to ease, resolve and address such situations. Hence, the concept of information needs embraces the materials required by people to ease, resolve, or otherwise address the situations arising in their lives. Information needs identifies two forms of information needs: for everyday life information and for official information. Everyday life information is related to the social, political, economic, religious and cultural aspects of life that help people to live meaningfully. Official information is that which is required by people to perform their official roles as professionals, technicians, workers, students and researchers (Alsudani et al. 2009, 46).

It follows that an assessment of the relevance and quality of university websites requires the identification of the information needs of website users. Websites play important roles in providing the information people need to meet the goals they set in their everyday life (Sheehan & Doherty, 2004.) Understanding and executing tasks require facts, figures and ideas that may be retrieved from websites (Sheehan & Doherty 2004, 117-124).

The literature shows that management, academic and non-academic, students and researchers internal stakeholders – are among the frequent users of university websites. Other users may include external stakeholders like parents, prospective students, staff and employers, accreditation agencies, immigration

and law enforcement agencies, donors and competitors. University stakeholders have information needs that revolve round their everyday life and their official needs. For example, (Youngblood 2013, 17.) evaluated the administrative information needs of academic staff that perform administrative roles as heads of department, while Schenkman, & Jonsson (2000) evaluated the research and teaching information needs of academic staff. These studies reveal that academics may perform dual roles and hence may have dual information needs (Schenkman & Jonsson. 2000, 367-377).

3 PRESENTATIONS OF CASE UNIVERSITIES

In view to realize the comparative analysis of how a website can serve as a marketing tool for higher education institution, three Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland were chosen. The criterion used in the selection of this sample was based on their location. These universities are situated in the countryside and with the introduction of tuition fees Finnish higher education institutions, these institutions would have to face fierce competition in competing for their share of prospective applicants.). The university website being the first reference point for a student when researching about the right selection of course and institution

Having in view the peculiarities of the selected case universities, their online marketing strategies are focused more on the image building, the presentation of the academic offer and the communication with the target public. In these conditions, the online environment is not employed only for the promotion of the academic offer but especially on the building of relationships with the target public. The website as a marketing tool for the selected institutions are analyzed in terms of how the website is conceived, what information the institution website tries to deliver and how this information is revealed

3.1 Website marketing strategies implemented in the case universities

The case universities are Centria University of Applied Sciences, Seamk University of Applied Sciences, and lastly Lapland University of Applied Sciences. The content of each of these universities website is summarized in TABLE 1. Content here refers to the internal navigation links on the main page of the institutions website. The study reveals many similarities among the case universities analyzed and the ways they conduct the marketing via their institution website. Most of the websites included large photos of students, places, people to inform prospective applicants and audiences about their offerings. In addition, they all had one or two levels of primary navigation of the website menu with familiar contents which include types of degree programmes, how to apply, contact information and more. Two of the websites included a calendar of events prominently on the university website, FAQs and student testimonials were also part of popular website strategies among the universities. Overall, the universities had a variety of verbal, visual and interactive components to their website to communicate their offerings and intercultural competence process.

TABLE 1. Content of the case universities website

Institution	Website content
Centria UAS	Applicants, Students, Services for business, About us, Contact, News, Shortcuts (Library service, Curriculum, Study possibilities)
Seamk UAS	About us, studies, Research & Development, International Relations, Study guide for international students, Info Pages, Health Services, Quick links
Lapland UAS	Applicants, Students, Employers, Who We Are, Degree programmes in English, Contact info, News, Events

While each of the case universities created an extensive website for themselves. Through a rhetorical analysis, this research work analyzed the web pages from marketing communication point of view. Elements such as web content, structure of relevant information on the web, visitors' engagement, visual messages, language and interactive features are included in the analysis.

3.2 Centria University of Applied Sciences

Centria University of Applied Sciences is a multidisciplinary, dynamic and international higher education institution located in Finland. Founded in 1992 in the coastal town of Kokkola as a nonprofit institution and consists of approximately 3000 students in 5 fields and 13 degree programmes. Centria UAS has relationships with universities in a multiple set of countries, such as US, Canada, China, Poland, France, Germany. The university offers degrees in Finnish and English based programs with bachelor degrees in Business Management, Information Technology, Industrial management, Environmental Chemistry and Technology, Nursing and DP in International Business (Centria UAS website)

When entering Centria's homepage, the language is both in Finnish and English. Major programs that can be found on the institution website are diverse ranging from Applicants, Students, Services for business, About us, Contact, News, Shortcuts. The homepage highlights on product information and advertisement of the institution position as being "The university with a Big Heart". By clicking on "About us", a drop-down information about Centria as an organization, campuses and region, internalization of Centria will surface. The university also has sales contact and public relations. By clicking on "Contact

us", information about administration, campuses, admissions office, international office, exchange programs and partner universities as well as guide for applicants can be found. Prospective applicants can find information about how to apply to the institution. It is also possible to mail, call or fax questions and comments (Centria UAS website).

Centria UAS website provides shortcuts into information about Curriculum, Library services, Averko Online courses, Centria Research and Development. The website includes a lot of advertisement and it is mostly covered in Finnish language. A peculiarity of using the website as a marketing tool is the inclusion of several university's social media links like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram on the institution's website, though the author observed that it takes a while to find the links, as it is under "Follow us on social media" at the bottom of the page. A click on the Instagram icon on the institution web page directly opens the school Instagram page where pictures about campus life are displayed. The institution website has a shortcut to study possibility where prospective applicants can learn about various taught courses as well as the admission requirements and exchange programme possibilities (Centria UAS website).

The author observed that even if the information provided by Centria UAS website is useful, well presented and easy to find, the esthetic aspect of the web page is a bit neglected. The website design is simple and the images, useful for covering the message, are few and not representative. Centria UAS does not display Study guide for international students, tuition, and other practical information which might be of good interest to prospective applicant. However, a strength in the university website marketing communication strategy is the inclusion of a section for social media where current and future students as well as interested persons can follow the universities via the social media platforms and gets updates on news and information.



FIGURE 3 copied from Centria UAS homepage

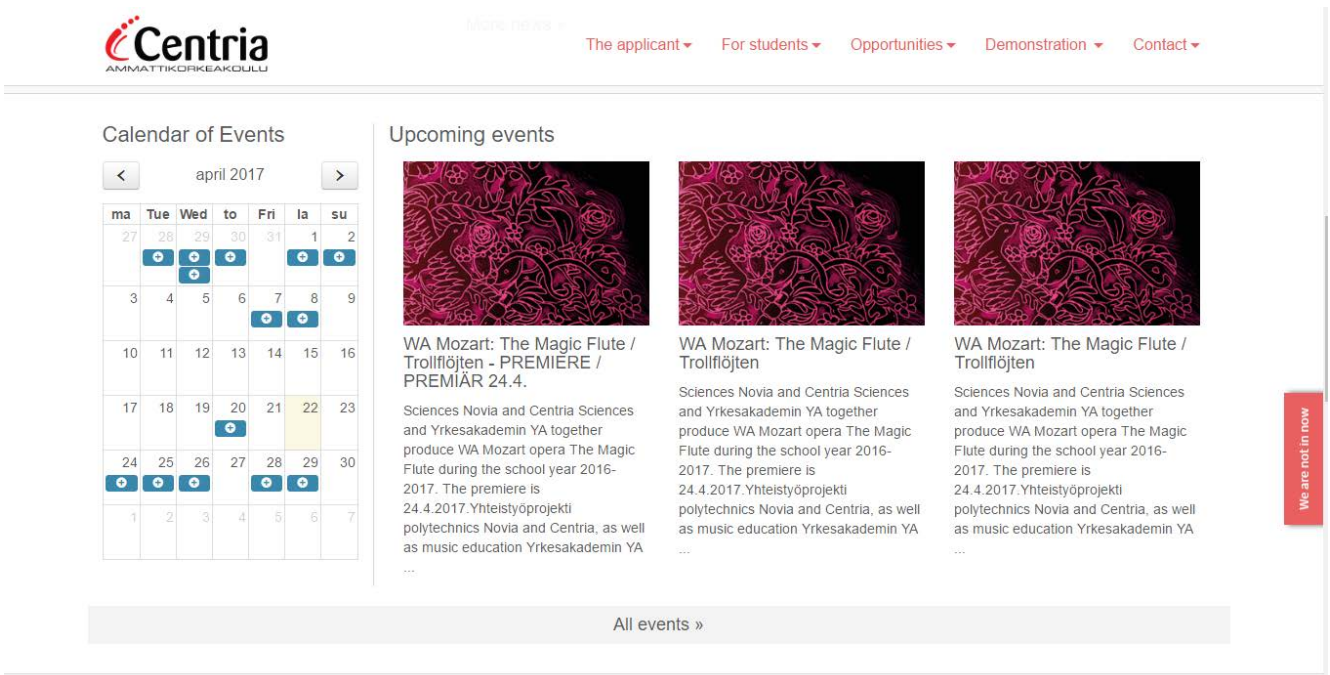
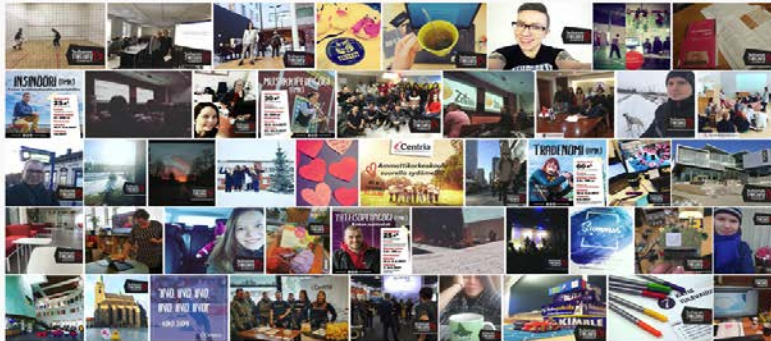


FIGURE 4 copied from Centria UAS homepage

Centria University of Applied Sciences Instagram! »



Complete your skills!

The search is ended 23/04/2017
Contract law, Kokkola

The search is ended 23/04/2017
Digitalization competitiveness of the
KEKO training

The search is ended 24/04/2017
Psyykiskä Första Hjälp 1, Kokkola

The search is ended 24/04/2017
Mental health first aid 1, Kokkola

The search is ended 25/04/2017
Building product training, Ylivieska

[More trainings »](#)

We are not in now



Source exchange!

Each student has the opportunity to go abroad as exchange students or training. This possibility is not to be exploited!

[Read more "](#)



Services of working life needs!

Our service offerings can be found in diverse activities including representatives of working life!

[Read more "](#)



Centria Library

Centria University of Applied Sciences Library is open to everyone library. The use of the library and borrowing books is free of charge. Check out the services offered by the library-Centria!

[Read more "](#)



We are not in now

Follow us somessa:     

Centria University of Applied Sciences

Talopojankatu 2
67100 KOKKOLA
Phone (06) 868 0200
Fax (06) 825 2000
info@centria.fi

For students

[Centraal »](#)
[AVERKO»](#)
[Library »](#)
[Menus»](#)

The applicant

[Day Implementations »](#)
[Blended Implementations»](#)
[Foreign language implementations »](#)
[Training Calendar»](#)
[Exchange students »](#)

Contact

[Governance](#)
[Campuses and facilities](#)
[Communications / media](#)
[Applicant Services](#)
[Student Services](#)
[International Affairs](#)
[Career Opportunities](#)
[Sponsorship and Partnerships](#)
[Real Estate](#)

We are not in now

FIGURE 5 copied from Centria UAS homepage

3.3 Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (Seinäjoki UAS) was founded in 1995. SEAMK activities focus on three campuses and has a student population of approximately 5000 in its three campuses. The main campus is located in Technology and Innovation Center Frami, Joupin and Marttilan parts of the city. Whitewater is located in Whitewater campus Alan on the road in Huhtala and Ilmajoen school campus is located on the farm in the municipality. Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences is managed by the Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences Oy. The school offers training in research and development services in six fields of study. The areas are; Cultural sector, Business sector, Natural Resources, Hospitality, Social and Health as well as high-technology industry (Seinäjoki UAS website).

Even if the main menu of the university website is similar to other universities being analyzed in this research, the university has done a tremendous job of keeping the balance between the use of eye catching imagery, navigation system, and the hierarchy of information placement on its homepage. Concerning communication with the public target, the website provides for the interested persons information regarding Study Guide, Info Pages, contact info, admission service, international office, Tuition fees and scholarship system amongst other", which may be of interest for prospective applicants (Seinäjoki UAS website).

In view to facilitate the communication with persons from other countries, the website can be accessed also in English. An interesting aspect regarding using the website as a communication tool is the possibility to watch student's testimonial videos on the school website.

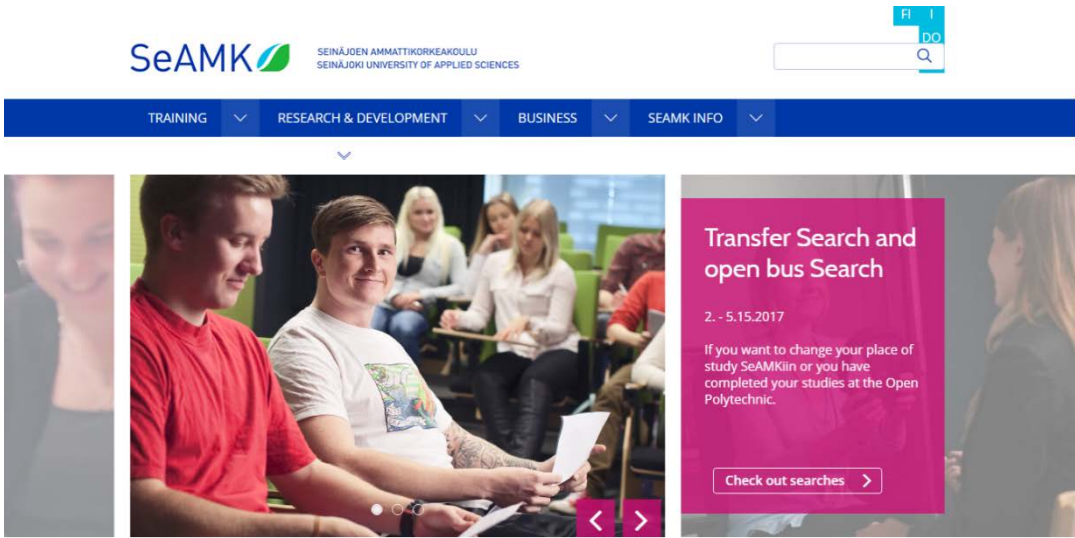


FIGURE 6 copied from Seamk UAS homepage

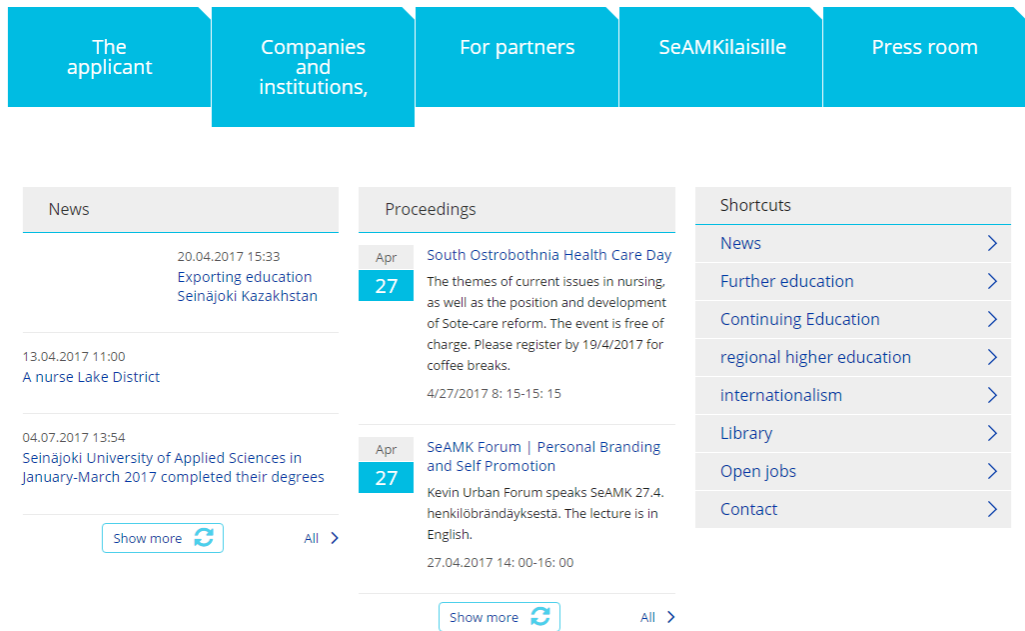


FIGURE 7 Copied from Seamk UAS homepage

Study Guide
ops.seamk.fi
Select a training and orientation

Finna search
Search the library's collections.
seamk.finna.fi
FINNA
Hakusana

Paid training

January 11 Training of occupational health nurses and physiotherapists (15 credits)
The application period until 31.05.2017
9/14/2017 8: 00-16.3.2018 16:00

Mar 29 Welcome to the well-being kehittämispajoihin Seinäjoki
29/03/2017 12: 00-16.5.2017 16:00

Apr 19 The service provider developer - erikoistumiskoulutus (30 credits)
The application period until 31.05.2017
9/11/2017 9: 00-25.5.2018 15:00

Follow somessa

Facebook
Twitter
YouTube
Instagram
Some Wall

FIGURE 8 copied from Seamk UAS homepage

Fields of study

Culture > Business and Administration > Natural Resources >

Hospitality > Social Services and Health Care > Engineering >

Durable food solutions

Smart and energy efficient systems

Very Able and creative individuals and communities

Entrepreneurship, new business concepts and service innovation

Contact

SeAMK Office

Street address:
Kampusranta 11 (Frami F)
60320 Seinäjoki

mailing address:
PO Box 412, 60101 SEINÄJOKI

☎ 020 124 3000 (exchange)

✉ seamk@seamk.fi

People Search

billing

all contact details

Admission and Student Services

Street address:
Kampusranta 11 (Frami F, Row 2)
60320 Seinäjoki

mailing address:
PO Box 46, 60101 SEINÄJOKI

applicant Services

☎ 020 124 5501

✉ hakijapalvelut@seamk.fi

student Services

☎ 020 124 5055

✉ opiskelijapalvelut@seamk.fi

SeAMK Research, Development and Innovation Services

SeAMK University Library

SeAMK Food and Agriculture

Business School and Culture

SeAMK Health and Social Care

SeAMK Technology

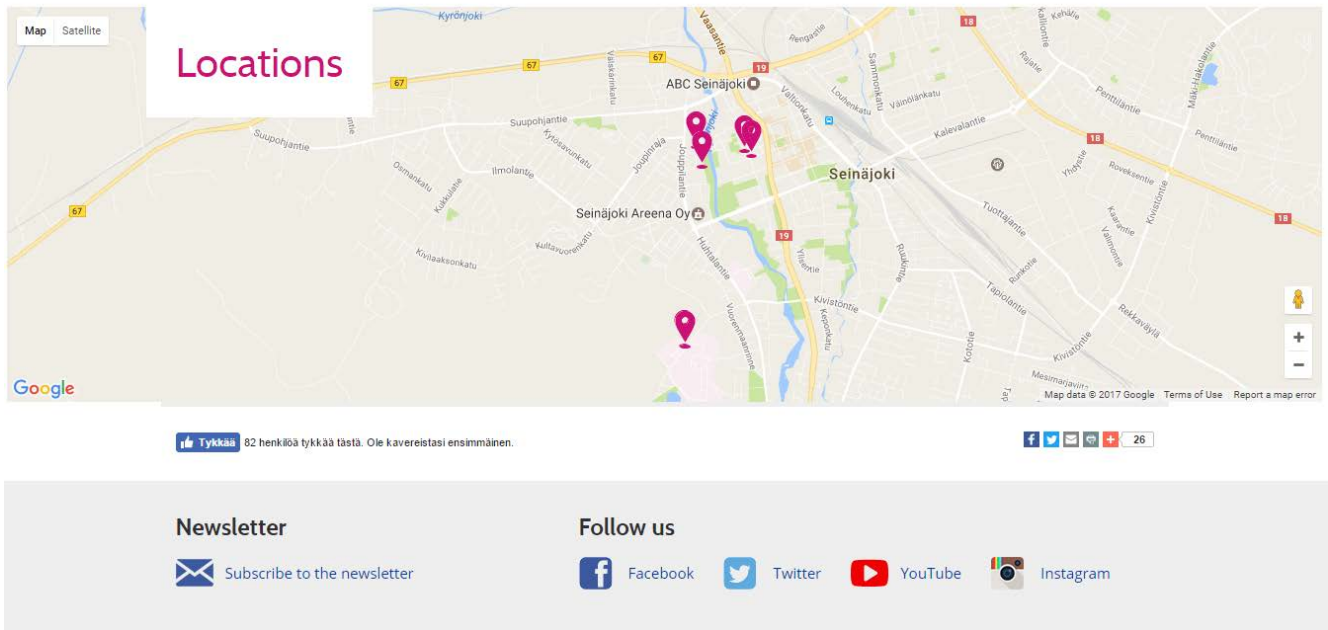


FIGURE 9 copied from Seamk UAS homepage



3.4 Lapland University of Applied Sciences

Lapland UAS is a Finnish university of allied sciences located in Kemi, Tornio and Rovaniemi. It was founded on January 1, 2014 as a merger between Rovaniemi University of Applied Sciences and Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences. The merger carried over all the features of the previous organizations. The institution has three campuses with about 6000 student's population (Lapland UAS website).

The first thing that a Lapland University of Applied Sciences website visitor observes is the way in which the home page was created. The design is very attractive and the relevant information is well

structured in the menus. The website content is also available in three languages: Finnish, Swedish and English. The web designer of Lapland UAS website incorporated” Applicants, Students, Employers section to the upper most layer of the website making relevant information easy to find for concerned stakeholders. There is also the inclusion of Study Guide” into the website to guide prospective step by step on application processes.

Taking into account the involvement of Lapland university of applied sciences in the social networks, there are six profiles created on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat and bebo, the home page allowing a fast access to each of them. The marketing communication strategy on the website is focused on graduated, actual and future students; in this way. For the actual and future students, it is based on the emphasis on the opportunities linked the possibility of an exchange program with over 120 partners across the world. More so, the institution website highlights the possibility to receive study grants up to \$10,000 for students to expand their horizon and study abroad. An interesting aspect of the website as a marketing communication tool is the possibility of students and relevant stakeholder to communicate their complaints to the academic staff in order to receive a feedback from them (Lapland UAS website).



FIGURE 10 copied from Lapland UAS homepage

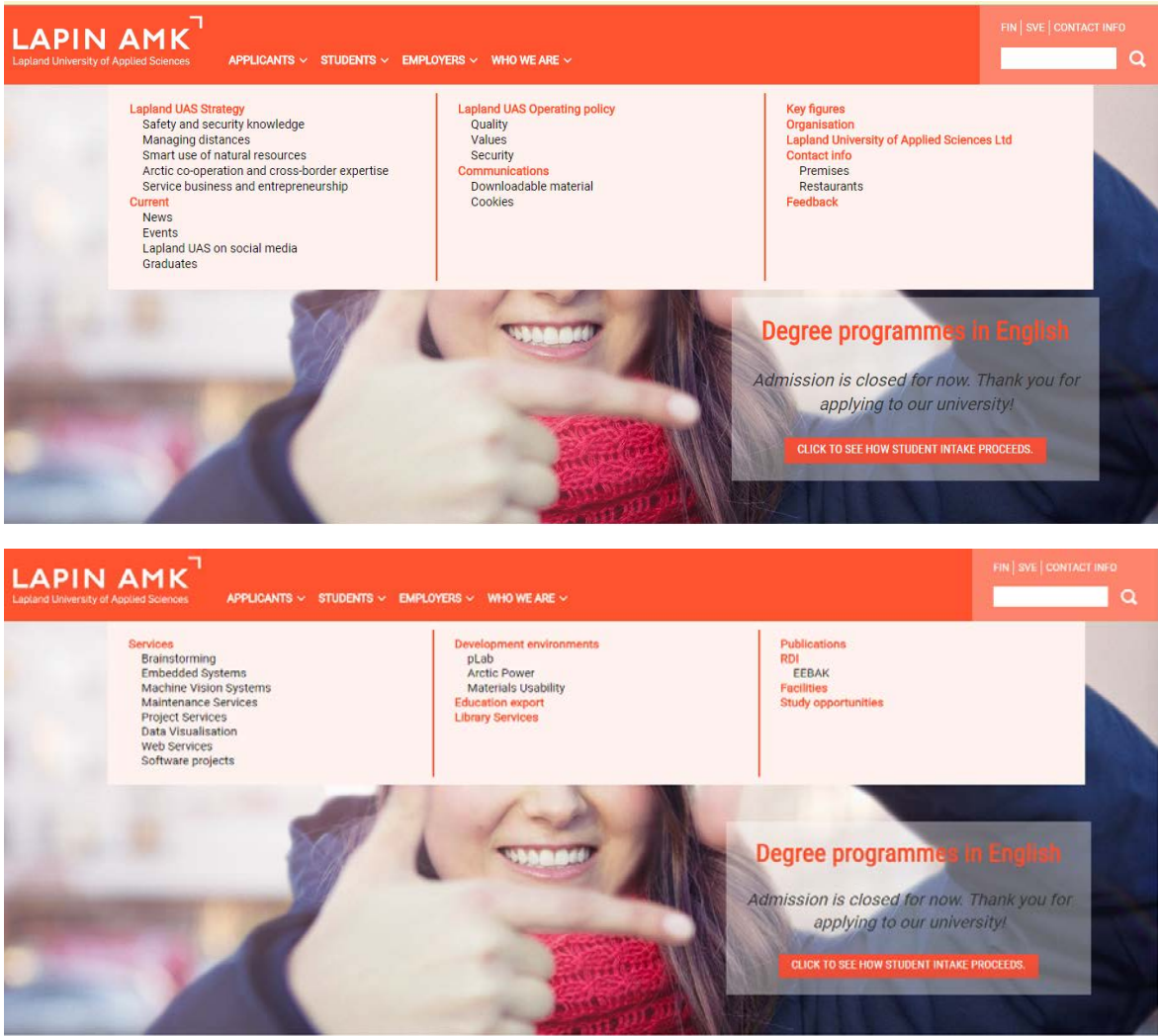


FIGURE 11 copied from Lapland UAS homepage

News

Current >

Lapland UAS exchange student's from Czech Republic won a car from the Tornio Ice fishing contest

Group of Lapland UAS student participated the ice fishing contest in Tornio last Saturday 25.3.2017.



Graduates in March 2017
 Congratulations to all the new graduates!



VALAKIAT – event Mini-Innomaraton
 VALAKIAT 2016 – event took place in Elämystehdas Lappari on the 10th of November.



Applicant number grew at Lapland UAS
 Applicant number in the international joint application process grew at Lapland University of Applied Sciences.

Load more news ↻

Events

Events Calendar >

Events

Events Calendar >

#LaplandUAS on social media



Lapin AMKin vuoden kovin pelitapahtuma eli Bitparty on parhaillaan käynnissä Jokiväylän toimipisteellä Rovaniemellä! 🎮🔥 Kyseessä on siis vuosittainen Lapin AMKin tieto- ja viestintätekniikan opiskelijoiden järjestämä, ensisijaisesti nuorisolle suunnattu tietokone- ja pelitapahtuma. Meno jatkuu

Kataja, Juniperus communis



Luonto heräilee taas pikkujuljia kevääseen. Nyt on hyvä aika käydä testaamassa mikä puulaji olet! #metsäpelit #upm #pelataan #puulajit #kevät #4Hsuomi #LapinAMK

Metsäpelit Instagram



Koulupäivä tällaisissa maisemissa leimikkoa mittailen ja lounas notskilla 🍃🌲 täysi talvi vielä #rovaniemi ✨ #ranua #lapinamk #metsätalousinsinööri #metsä #forestry #spring #kevät #opiskelijaelämää

Paula P



Mitakkaa te, ni juoma kahavit. #opiskelu #lapinamk #metsätalousinsinööri #metsäala #flunssaeihaittaa

Metsäreportteri Laura Instagram



FIGURE 12 copied from Lapland UAS homepage

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the study's research methods and design combined with data collection through interviews, surveys and observations. This is followed by a presentation of the study's validity, reliability and limitations.

Due to the interest of conducting research on the use of website as a marketing tool within the field of marketing and how higher education institutions in Finland attract and enroll students, the study was delimited towards three Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland. This became imperative with the introduction of tuition fees which put some universities especially those situated in the country-side at a disadvantage. This suited the study's purpose of examining how these institutions could compete and attract students. The introduction described the competition that will follow the introduction of tuition fees in Finnish higher educational institutions. This was an influencing factor for the chosen topic since its tuition fee is a new phenomenon in Finnish higher institutions.

The higher education industry in Finland has recently received a lot of attention due to the introduction of tuition fees. Before now, education was free at all levels in Finland and there has been little or no competition between and among these institutions.

4.1 Research purpose

Research can be defined as something that people undertake to find out things and collect data as well as interpret the data systematically, with a clear purpose. Research methodology involves an explanation of the methods used for the collection of the data and any limitations linked to them. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2000). There are three main stages in research; explanatory, descriptive and explanatory.

Explanatory research is designed to allow the investigator "look around" with some respect to some phenomenon. The aim is developed suggestive ideas. The research should be flexible as possible and provide guidance for procedures. The focus is initially broad and becomes progressively narrow as the research progresses (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2000, 2-3).

Descriptive research portrays accurate profiles of person, objects, events or situations. In this kind of research, it is necessary to have a clear picture of the phenomena on which you want to collect information to the data collection (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2000, 3.) while explanatory research establishes causal relationships between variables. Here, the emphasis is on studying a situation or a problem in order to explain the relationships between variables (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2000, 3).

4.2 Research design

In this study, content analysis method was adopted to explore the website of the Centria UAS, SEAMK UAS and Lapland UAS. Content analysis is one of the most suitable instruments, applied by researchers. It involves systematic analysis as well as observation to identify the specific information content and other characteristics of the messages. Content analysis studies the message itself and involves the design of a systematic observation and recording procedure for quantitative disruption of the manifest content of communication (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2000,2-9).

In this study, the scale to assess website content information was adapted from the study of Padmanavar & Joshi (2011). Although there were 52 items in their study, this study only focus on 21 of them which Admission information, courses/programs offered, Health services, Fund/Award/Scholarship, student exchange possibility, MOU with other universities, Students development, Library service, Alumni information, Student testimonials, employment possibility, employment possibilities, news, location information, contacts, quick links, study guide, social media links, events, student union, degree programs, research and development. 31 items are left out because these variables are not suitable for the case universities website or not similar to each other. Social media links here refer to the availability of social networking sites like Facebook and twitter links on the homepages because they are popular social networking sites.

4.3 Target population

In this study, respondents comprised of a marketing communication manager of the case universities and students from each of the three case universities formed the target population.

4.4 Sampling size

A sample of 150 respondents was targeted; a total of six respondents (three marketing communication managers for the case universities: and three students) from each of the universities were selected. The selected samples were representative for generalization of research finding.

5 DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents analysis and findings of the study as set out in the research methodology. Presentation and analysis serve as a core of any research since it gives meaning to the raw data collection during the data collection stage. The analysis give consideration since the conclusion and recommendation concerning a research is derived from data presentation and analysis. The results were presented on website as a marketing communication tool; a case study of three universities of applied sciences in Finland. The study objectives were: to determine how university website portray the school image, the importance of a good website in higher education marketing, and the influence of a university website on prospective student college.

The study targeted 150 respondents, (50 from each university) out of which all the 150 respondents responded and returned their questionnaires contributing to a response rate of 100 %. This response rate was sufficient and representative and conforms to (Andrew & Kurtz 2010, 3-10) stipulation that a response rate of 50 % is adequate for analysis and reporting; a rate of 60 % is good while a response rate of 70 % and over is excellent.

This commendable response rate was due to extra efforts that were made via courtesy calls made to remind the respondents to fill-in and return the questionnaires. The chapter covers the demographic information, and the findings based on the objectives. The findings were then presented in tables, graphs and charts as appropriate with explanations being given in prose thereafter.

5.1 Information about the interviewees

There were totally 150 participants across the 3 case universities in three interviews. 50 participants were selected from each of the 3 universities. The majority of the participants were foreign students. There were only 4 Finnish students and all from Lapland UAS. The participants studied in different programs which include: Nursing, International Business, Business Management, Information technology. Thus, they barely knew each other except people from the same program. Most of them were in the first and the second year. Some participant had studied at a university before their current studies.

5.2 Contents of the case universities website

The study revealed many similarities among the three universities analyzed and all the way they conduct their marketing communication efforts. All the websites included large photos of students, places, people and even student testimonials to market the institution to prospects. In addition, they all had two or more levels of primary navigation through the "Applicant" section on the website, with similar content including bachelor degree programs, exchange students, Applying, Guide for new students, student stories, and more. Centria UAS included a calendar of events prominently on its home page. Frequently asked Seamk UAS and Seamk UAS had frequently asked questions (FAQs) were also part of the popular strategies of the two universities. Overall, the case universities had a variety of verbal, visual, and interactive components to their websites to communicate their offerings and pursue their marketing communication objectives.

5.3 Research questions

The following questions (App 1) were the main questions, or the ones to be studied and analyzed. First, the students were asked what image did the school website portrayed to them about the school during the application period into the school. Secondly, was the web content on the institution homepage convincing enough to influence their choice of institution. Last, if any, what information from the institution's web content had the most influence on them when they decided to apply for admission and to evaluate the importance of those information. They were also asked to rate the factors on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 meaning "not at all" and 5 "very important".

5.3.1 How does a university website portray the school image?

Participants were asked if the university website was their first point of contact with the school before gaining admission and how does the university website portray the school to them and if the information obtained on the website was convinced enough to influence their final decision to choose the school out of others.

There were a lot of answers given by the participants. However, answers with similar contents were summarized into one. There were actually 17 different answers. The answers could be divided into two main categories: Contents of the website, Other contacts with the school.

TABLE 2

Website Content	Some other contact with the school
Admission information	Friends currently studying at the school
Student exchange possibility	Recommendation from someone
MOU with other universities	Fairs
Student testimonials	Internet search
Employment possibilities	
Contact	
Study guide	

Out of 150 participants, 116 said the university website was their first point of contact with the institution as they had no previous contact or recommendation from anyone to influence their university of choice. Some of the respondents said that the ease of accessing and navigating information couple with student testimonials on the institution's homepages had a positive determining factor for their choice.

5.3.2 Did the institution's websites influence student enrolment in respective UAS

The study established that institution website influence student enrolment. Internet used through university websites had a high usage rate which was equally indicated by student use in accessing university information. Websites were rated as most effective direct marketing communication tools in their institution selection choice. This study finding concurs with (Andrew & Kurtz 2010, 9-10) where they stressed on the importance of the recruitment funnel, the series of contacts to potential students that included the use of direct mail, the World Wide Web, campus visit programs, telemarketing (alumni), and special events, which moves a prospective student from initial contact to matriculation. Hence, universities must have a clear understanding, of which type of consumers that make up their target markets.

Marketing communication can boost student enrolment by stretching messages across several communications tools to create more avenues for customers to become aware, aroused, and ultimately chose the

product. A clear and well-organized website is an important tactic in an overall marketing communication recruitment strategy. This student-centered communication strategy allows prospective students to visit an institution's website repeatedly and interact with representatives from colleges and universities. This study revealed that prospective students do indeed use the Internet. Institutions should establish procedures for answering e-mail and review changing their Web sites to appeal to students at national and international level

The study also found out that some of the universities are underusing social networks like Face book and Twitter to use as student recruitment tools. Technological advancements are changing how student recruitment is being conducted in higher learning institutions in targeting the techno-literate prospective students.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study proves that design and aesthetics have a profound impact on how users perceive information, learn, judge credibility and usability, and ultimately assign value to a product. Though style does not replace substance, but style and substance in balance work much better. To dismiss design as merely visual is to make a fundamental mistake. Image and perception of an organization are linked inextricably to the communication paradigm.

There is no doubt that websites have become strong information and communication tools in modern-times. It has helped universities reach unimaginable places and audiences. The growing interest in measuring the extent to which universities use their websites attests to the increasing importance universities now accord to their websites. When designing the web for marketing communications, it is important to choose suitable content, visual elements and aesthetics which provides dual benefits of conveying the right message to the right audience as well as creating strong and emotional connection with the viewers.

It is important to mention that no matter how visually attractive and eye-catching a university website seems; the overuse of graphics and scattered information can easily confuse potential students and will result in a loss of interest. To attract prospective students and to bolster recruitment efforts, it is therefore necessary to keep the design simple with the appropriate use of images and related information that is well-organized and easy to find, along with a user-friendly navigation system. One the best ways to keep the admission application experience at its best for prospective applicants is to design the school websites so that they are the needed information by these group can be easily use the site, find information and access help where needed. The contents of a website should be clear, well written, without errors, and the user should be able to see how to navigate the site. User's first impression upon visiting a homepage creates bias about the organization that affects the consumers mental image and affects all aspects of business.

Although observation gathered from student response in the questionnaire shows that the case universities are doing well in terms of good contents and the use of visual elements and aesthetics on their websites in communicating school offerings and opportunities to students and other stakeholders, still these institutions can do more by having good architectural and relevant contents on their website in order to achieve the website's goals and objectives. To be able to do this, the case universities add site meta tag descriptions, site key words and incorporate images in the right number. Although there is no

standard number of images is recommended as the standard number of images to use for a website, however, the web designer must understand that the under or over use of images may distort both the communicability and architecture of a website. Frantic efforts must also be made to improve on web contents to cover both official information and everyday life information. Very crucial everyday life information such as information on healthcare services, host community, social media, tuition fee/ scholarship, exchange programme possibility and so on should be covered on these universities' websites.

This study therefore, concludes that the case universities should make it a matter of urgency to improve their websites architecture and contents. This will make their websites a good marketing communication tool. This will not only increase their websites usability and visibility, but also help in conveying the right image about the school to prospective applicants and other stakeholders, thereby help in marketing the school and ultimately increase student enrolment.

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The following questions are based upon the perspective of this study's purpose of describing and analyzing the effectiveness of web content, visual elements and aesthetics in the use of website as a marketing communication tool and if these elements influenced student's choice in college selection process. Thus, your answer in accordance to this focal point would be appreciated. The questionnaire takes approximately 5 minutes of your time.

Best regards,
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1. During admission process into your current institution, did you at any point interacted with or used the institution's website?

YES	NO
<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>	<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>

2. How easy was it to find information and navigate the university's homepage?

YES	NO
<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>	<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>

3. Compare with other universities of Applied Science, how informative and useful is your institution website in providing the information needed during the application process?

YES	NO
<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>	<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>

4. Did the university website portrayed a good image of the university?

YES	NO
<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>	<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>

5. Did your experience on the university website changed the way you felt about the institution?

YES	NO
<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>	<input style="width: 100px; height: 30px;" type="checkbox"/>

6. Did the university website portrayed a good image of the university?

YES

NO

7. Did your favourability, and overall image of the university as a good institution changed after your exploration of the university's website?

YES

NO

8. Before making your choice of university, did you find the web-page helpful towards providing relevant information?

YES

NO

9. Did the university's website work as an influencing factor in your college selection process?

YES

NO

10. The admission phase deals with interaction and communication with the educational institution of choice. How effective is the contacts information placed on the institution's homepage?

YES

NO