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Digital Advertising and the College Search:

A Critical Ethnography of Students of Color from the San Joaquin Valley

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Patricia Alejandra Martín

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Digital Advertising and the College Search:

A Critical Ethnography of Students of Color from the San Joaquin Valley

by

Patricia Alejandra Martín

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Ozan Jaquette, Chair

This dissertation examines how first-generation high school Students of Color from California's San Joaquin Valley navigate digital marketing and advertising during their college search and application processes, offering a timely contribution to the study of college admissions in a post-affirmative action landscape. Higher education institutions are competing for the attention of prospective students, yet the overwhelming influx of online information—through emails and social media advertisements—often leaves students confused and fatigued. This is particularly critical for underrepresented communities, where providing clear, credible information can make a significant difference in students' college decisions. Using a 14-month

Chicana/Latina Feminista Critical Ethnography (CLCFE), I explore how first-generation, low-income, high-achieving Latinx and Students of Color from the San Joaquin Valley make sense of digital advertising in their college search. The study employs pláticas (a Chicana/Latina Feminista methodology focused on community reflection), participant observations, document collection of 2,000 digital advertisements (e.g., emails and social media posts), and a focus group to examine how these students interact with digital marketing during their college decision-making process. Informed by the conceptual frameworks of college-*conocimiento* (Acevedo-Gil, 2017), academic capitalism (Slaughter et al., 2004), and critical digital studies, this study, explores how technology shapes the social dynamics of college application processes for Students of Color. Findings reveal that students primarily rely on Google searches and social media platforms to navigate their college search, creating a feedback loop where exposure to college advertisements influences their subsequent interactions and decisions. Despite seeking information about California's public universities (UC and CSU systems), students are bombarded with advertisements promoting private and out-of-state institutions, further complicating and overwhelming their college application process. This dissertation makes a significant contribution to the college choice literature by critically examining the role of digital technologies in students' decision-making, a topic that has been largely overlooked. It also offers new insights for the field of enrollment management, which has focused on marketing strategies but often neglected the impact of these efforts on students' choices. Finally, the findings have important implications for policy and practice, particularly in developing culturally relevant digital marketing strategies to engage prospective students from underserved communities across California.

The dissertation of Patricia Alejandra Martín is approved.

Walter R. Allen

Ananda M. Marin

Safiya U. Noble

Karina Salazar

Ozan Jaquette, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION

Para mis padres, Patricia Martín Varela and Ramón Martín Pérez, porque me dieron alas. Ustedes me enseñaron a valorar el estudio por que nadien te lo puede quitar.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES & FIGURES

Tables

Figures

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

This long journey would not have been possible without the incredible community that supported me along the way. I am deeply grateful to have such a strong and loving family, as well as friends who have been a constant source of encouragement. To everyone who has touched my life in any way—thank you, from the bottom of my heart!

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VITA

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Jaquette, O., Salazar, K.S., & **Martín, P**. (2024). Finding the Right Students: The Student List Business and Enrollment Management. In S. J. Burd (Eds.), *Lifting the Veil on Enrollment Management: How a Powerful Industry is Limiting Social Mobility in American Higher Education* (pp. 109-129). Harvard Education Press.

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Sanchez, S., Freeman, R., & **Martín, P**. (2021). Educators are Stressed, Overworked, and Not Sure Whom to Trust: Legacy of the Trump Era. In Gándara, P., & Ee, J. (Eds). *Schools under Siege: The Impact of Immigration Enforcement on Educational Equity* (pp. 113-130). Harvard Education Press.

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Haro, N.B., & **Martín, P***. (2024). The Contours of a Chicana/Latina Feminista Critical Ethnography: A Collective Enseñanza from Nepantleras. Sociology of Education Association Conference. Monterey, CA. (Paper).

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2016 - 2017	UC Santa Barbara University Service Award

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Disparities in online college information can exacerbate inequities in college admissions for underrepresented students. As technology and social media giants compete for attention, the issue for prospective college students is not whether they receive information about college but the type and quantity of information flooding their screens. Recent digital marketing efforts in higher education contribute to students' confusion and fatigue with college information. Therefore, this dissertation interrogates the role of digital marketing efforts in college access, particularly in a post-affirmative action higher education landscape where access to information can help underrepresented students make more informed college decisions.

In my engagement with research participants, who I refer to as collaborators, I find the ubiquitous use of digital platforms and technologies like Google Search, social media, and emails to gather information about college. A research collaborator, María, reflects on her experience using digital technologies including Google in her college process.

> So, I feel as a first-generation college student, I was really dependent on Google because I didn't really know how to apply to [college]. I didn't know what I needed and for me, I was the first person in my family to apply to UC. So, I felt like I was really dependent on the information given to me. So I was confused all the time. So every time I saw a website, I put all my trust into it. Because I didn't know who else to ask. Even though I have a lot of mentors, and people helping me, I still felt like I needed to Google everything.

Despite having access to institutional agents, María felt dependent on Google for college information. María's confusion is relevant to scholarship on the disconnect between expectations counselors have that students can make sense of college information online and the challenges students report in making sense of the online information they were engaging with (Shamsuddin, 2024).

María's use of Google search and social media in her college search stemmed from the lack of support she received from her counselor and her desire to seek online resources to understand the college application process. When I asked María where she was in her college process in January 2023, she shared she had not done much research at the time and did not know where to start. When I asked if she could share how she planned to structure her research, she says "I would YouTube like oh 'How to apply to college and I would try to do that.'"

Despite being unfamiliar with the college application process, María had high aspirations of pursuing a law degree and becoming a lawyer. She was motivated to help others navigate the legal system and seek justice. Maria's drive and motivation were fueled by her own personal experiences– a terrible assault that almost took her mother's life– and bonding with her mother through watching crime shows on TV. As I discuss below, María was not initially a part of a college preparatory program at her school, pseudonym Educational Insights and Success Program, hereafter EISP. After several pláticas with María, she shared that her counselor discouraged her from enrolling in AP courses her junior year and told her she could consider taking AP courses in her senior year. "Like he's always postponing everything. Like for my PSAT, I got a really good score in English. And when I asked him to like if I could take AP English. And he said, 'No,' he said, 'Wait until you're in 12th grade.'" I asked her why she

thought he responded in that way. Below, she shares her experience interacting with her counselor in seeking support.

Patricia:	And he didn't say why [wait to enroll in AP senior year]?
María:	He never told me why. Like, every time he tells me stuff, he never gives me a reason.
Patricia:	And like when you meet with your counselor, do you ever talk to him about college? Or does he ever mention…
María:	Never.
Patricia:	So do you ask or does he…
María:	I ask but I don't know. Like he doesn't really respond. Like the way he responds is kind of confusing.
Patricia:	Can you provide an example of how?
María:	Like I ask him if there is anything I could do for college. Or how to do the application application process? He says "Wait until you're in the 12th grade, you're still a junior."

In my first plática with Maria's mom, she shares that she has tried calling María's counselor on several occasions, and he would tell her he is too busy and hang up the phone. Her mom tells me, "I think it is because of the way she [Maria] looks, how she dresses and does her makeup." Maria, in fact, always had her makeup and hair done to perfection. Typically, she styled her brown and blonde streaked hair in a sleek half-up and half-down side swoop, her bangs parted and swooped to her left side. Her winged eyeliner black, symmetrical, and angled perfectly. Her eyelashes were long and voluminous, and every part of her makeup was done with intention. Her negative experiences with school staff were not isolated to her counselor. In a plática we had at the end of the semester about the courses she was planning to take her senior year, she told me she was nervous to take AP courses because she had a bad experience when she tried taking an AP class. "The teacher was going over the syllabus on the first day, and I

asked a question because I was confused and he replied, 'If you are already asking questions on the first day, you should drop this class.' And so she did.

The experiences María shared with me speak to her using YouTube to learn "How to apply to college" since her counselor dismissed her attempts to seek guidance and support. Despite receiving a good English score on her PSAT and a perfect 4.0 GPA, her counselor and teacher ignored her. María was not tracked into AP and honors courses like some of the other collaborators. Unable to change counselors, I told her she should consider joining EISP and seek college support from the site coordinator at her school, Ms. Rendon. I invited her to an email etiquette workshop I coordinated with Ms. Rendon at the school, and María eventually joined the program. During my volunteering at the college lab in the fall 2023 semester, I ran into María from time to time after school as she worked on her college applications.

Like María, I, too, had a terrible experience with my counselor, who, despite being a lovely elderly woman, would fall asleep during our meetings. On one occasion, I got up and notified the front desk that she was unresponsive, afraid she had died in front of me. To my shock and horror, the front desk assistant responded, "Oh when she takes her medication in the afternoons, it makes her drowsy." Fortunately, I was part of a college prep program similar to EISP that made it possible for me to successfully apply and enroll in college. Yet, concerning is the reality of students who do not have access to counselors or someone like Ms. Rendon to help them apply to college and the varying levels of reliance these students have on Google search and social media platforms for college support. While all collaborators had varying levels of support from protective and institutional agents, all still utilized Google search and social media platforms for college support. For example, María received support from her parents, who read

and provided feedback on her college essays despite not having the opportunity to attend a four-year institution themselves. Her mother fiercely advocated for her calling her counselor several times, and proudly flaunted how incredibly intelligent and responsible María was for her age. After the heinous attack that left her mother a quadriplegic, María had to balance the responsibilities of the household as the eldest daughter, manage her family's small business, her schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and apply to college. Although María also received support from me, Ms. Rendon, and other institutional agents, she felt reliant on Google and social media platforms for college information.

This dissertation is grounded in the literatures of college choice and enrollment management, while also drawing on scholarship from sociology and media studies to explore the intersection of the digital and the social in the college decision-making process. This chapter argues that examining digital marketing strategies in higher education is not only a matter of college access but also a critical issue in enrollment management. Data shows that students are online Vogels et al. (2022), and my dissertation finds that they rely on their devices, Google search, and social media to learn about and make decisions about college.

College choice models and Perspectives

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice outlines the college decision-making process in three broad phases: predisposition, college search, and college choice. Other perspectives on college choice emphasize various factors that influence students' decisions, including the costs and benefits of attending college (Becker, 1994; Long, 2007), the organizational context of K-12 schools that can facilitate or hinder college access (McDonough, 1997, 1998), and integrated models that account for both micro and macro-level factors (Perna,

2006). While these perspectives may differ in their focus, most scholars agree that the college decision-making process is complex, nuanced, and deeply contextual.

The three-phase model of college choice, as outlined by Hossler & Gallagher (1987), remains one of the most widely referenced frameworks for understanding how students make decisions about college. The college choice literature extensively discusses a range of factors that influence these decisions, such as cost, academic preparation, school-based college-going culture, and parental influence (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Perna, 2006). However, there is relatively little research on how students acquire information about colleges and how this information impacts their decision-making process (Galotti & Mark, 1994).

A critical gap in the literature is the bidirectional relationship between students' online college searches and the digital advertisements they encounter, and how these interactions shape their perceptions of higher education and the college application process. While research from the supply-side perspective, including marketing and enrollment management, critically examines the recruitment and advertising practices of colleges and universities as a key issue in college access, it has not fully addressed how these practices influence students' decisions about which colleges to apply to. My dissertation bridges these literatures by exploring how students engage with digital technologies and platforms to gather information about colleges and how the content they interact with—specifically digital advertisements and online materials—shapes their college choice process.

Higher Education Marketing and Enrollment Management

Research on marketing, admissions, and recruiting has illuminated the dynamic and multifaceted nature of undergraduate admissions and, more broadly, enrollment management. While institutions often employ similar tactics and overarching recruiting strategies, their approaches are frequently influenced by their position within the competitive landscape of higher education, particularly their institutional rank (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015).

U.S. higher education is often described as the "most market-oriented system in the world" (Dill, 2003, p. 137). This marketization, in part driven by deregulation, has compelled colleges and universities to compete not only for students but also for research funding, faculty, and other critical resources (Dill, 2003). The intensifying competition, both domestically and internationally, catalyzed a paradigm shift, prompting universities to adopt marketing strategies more typical of the business world (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Simultaneously, the decline in the traditional college-aged population in the mid-1970s, along with increasing competition from both domestic and international institutions, pushed public universities to embrace business-oriented strategies. This shift ultimately gave rise to the formalized field of enrollment management (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015).

Hossler et al. (1990) defined enrollment management as "both an organizational concept and a systematic set of activities designed to enable educational institutions to exert greater influence over their student enrollments and the net tuition revenue generated from those enrollments". He emphasized that enrollment management is underpinned by strategic planning and institutional research, encompassing key areas such as student college choice, transition to college, retention, and student outcomes (Hossler et al., 1990, p. 5).

Over the past few decades, the widespread adoption of strategic enrollment management (SEM) at colleges and universities has been driven by isomorphic pressures (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Factors such as the continued decline in state funding, shifts in the demographic makeup of prospective students, the proliferation of two- and four-year for-profit institutions, and the persistent emphasis on institutional rankings suggest that strategic enrollment management is not only enduring but also evolving in response to these challenges (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Consequently, SEM provides a valuable framework for understanding how colleges and universities market and recruit students in the contemporary higher education landscape.

The enrollment funnel (see Figure 1.1) is a key tool used by enrollment managers to identify prospective students and guide them through various stages toward enrollment (Campbell, 2017; Salazar et al., 2021). This process is typically segmented into stages: leads/prospects, inquiries, applicants, admits, and enrolled students (Campbell, 2017; Salazar et al., 2021). At each stage, targeted strategies are employed to move students through the funnel and ultimately convert them into enrolled students (Campbell, 2017; Salazar et al., 2021). Sociological and qualitative case studies on enrollment management often focus on the early stages of this process—particularly recruitment via off-campus visits (Stevens, 2007), TV commercials (Posecznick, 2017), and mass collection of behavioral data on students (Cottom, 2017).

Figure 1.1

Enrollment Management Funnel

Despite the widespread practice of higher education marketing (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), studies examining the use of social media largely focus on "unpaid" marketing approaches, such as social media pages hosted by colleges and universities. This scholarship focuses on ways to enact effective social marketing strategies to connect with prospective students (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Peruta & Shields, 2018) but does not discuss how these marketing approaches inform students' decisions.

Sociology of Education and Digital Algorithms

Technology has fundamentally reshaped market dynamics by transforming users into the raw material from which vast quantities of behavioral data are extracted—such as likes, clicks, views, and search histories (Fourcade & Healy, 2013, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). This data is then fed into algorithms that have deleterious societal impacts from product recommendations to hiring

decisions because they are built upon historical data that often reflects and perpetuates societal prejudices and inequalities (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018; o'neil, 2016). As a result, algorithms can exacerbate existing inequalities, such as racial discrimination in hiring practices, biased predictive policing tools, or discriminatory credit scoring systems that disadvantage marginalized communities (Benjamin, 2019; o'neil, 2016). By operating in this way, these algorithms not only reproduce existing biases but can also entrench them, creating harmful feedback loops that significantly impact people's lives and opportunities (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021).

Despite growing awareness of bias in advertising (Angwin & Parris Jr, 2016; Merrill et al., 2018; Sweeney, 2013), research on advertising practices in the field of education remains limited. Some studies across various disciplines have examined platform bias in the distribution of ads on social media platforms like Meta (Imana et al., 2024), the discriminatory nature of scholarship advertisements (Chang et al., 2021), and the spatial dynamics of TV advertising (Marifian, 2024). However, there is still a gap in understanding how digital advertisements specifically shape students' college decision-making processes. This dissertation contributes to this emerging body of scholarship by investigating both how students receive and engage with online content, including advertisements, and how they interpret this information in ways that influence their college choices.

Theoretical Perspectives

Conventional models of college choice discuss steps and factors informing students' college processes and decisions. This scholarship while informative, does not adequately capture the intersectional experiences of students of color, particularly Latinx students whose college choice process may not be linear. Rooted within the college choice scholarship and in the

Chicana/Latina epistemology of *conocimiento* Acevedo-Gil (2017) proposes a model of college choice for Latinx students. Within this model, I situate the experiences of collaborators in my study, although not all identified as Chicanx/Latinx. This model transform our understanding highlighting how Latinx students navigate a precarious space and often return to *nepantla* a in-between space of knowledge and sharing (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). While this model better encapsulates the experiences of Latinx students, I build on this to argue that a digital *nepantla* space is missing from this model. I find collaborators circle back to digital technologies and platforms to inform decisions in addition to the resources and support they receive from institutional and protective agents. This digital *nepantla* exists within scholarship on feedback loops created through behavioral trace data and used to feed algorithms. In the same way, collaborators search things up on search engines and social media and what they search is used to feed the content they engage with, thereby creating feedback loops of information. As collaborators continue to search for more information, they algorithm is modified and adjusted as such. Therefore it is imperative that college access literature and enrollment management literature further examine how digital technologies in the college application process, are critical for students.

Purpose of Study & Research Questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the role of digital technologies in students' college choice processes. Given the dearth of literature on digital advertising in higher education college admissions, this dissertation makes a timely contribution to the college access and enrollment management literatures. As technology continues to evolve and students are using technology, particularly from underrepresented backgrounds, we need to understand the role of

these technologies for both impeding and promoting college access. Understanding how institutions advertise to students and how students make sense of this information is a college access issue.

Research Questions

The research questions informing this dissertation include the following:

1. How do high school students in the San Joaquin Valley receive and engage with digital technologies and advertisements in their college application process?
2. How do students understand or make meaning of the advertisements they receive from digital platforms?
3. In what ways do the advertisements students receive inform their college search and application decisions?

Research Methods

I employ a Chicana/Latina Feminista Critical Ethnography (CLFCE) (Haro & Martin, in review), rooted in critical ethnography and Chicana/Latina Feminista epistemologies (CLFE) (Bernal, 1998) to gain a deeper understanding of how high school Latinx and students of color from the San Joaquin Valley receive, engage, and make sense of digital advertisements in their college search process. The critical ethnographer, Madison (2011) writes has an 'ethical responsibility' to address injustices within particular contexts. She adds, "The conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they could be for a specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels an ethical obligation to make a contribution toward changing those

conditions toward greater freedom and equity." (p. 5). Critical ethnographers aim to move away from objectivity in traditional ethnography and towards reflexivity, a "move to contextualize our own positionality, thereby making it accessible, transparent, and vulnerable to judgment and evaluation" (Madison, 2011, p. 9). Acknowledging that critical ethnography alone does not center Chicana/Latina feminist sensibilities, scholars have used critical ethnography and CLFE to co-create knowledge with participants and engage in critical reflexivity to support participants in tangible ways (Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Haro, 2020). Drawing from critical ethnography and Chicana/Latina Feminsta epistemologies, a Chicana/Latina Feminista Critical Ethnography (CLFCE) is informed by the following six principles:

1. Draws from Chicana/Latina feminsta critical theories and methodologies
2. Is in continuous reflexivity of power and positionality
3. Centers actionable care in humanizing collaborators
4. Engages in movidas with research collaborators in navigating systems of oppression
5. Is deeply embedded in comadreando in co-constructing knowledge with collaborators
6. Is a political act of love and social justice-driven

Collectively, these six principles aim to center the experiences of Latinx and students of color and disrupt research practices that extract and harm communities (Haro & Martin, in review). Through a CLFCE, I aimed to embrace my feminsta sensibilities and cultural intuition to bring forth new ways of engaging in critical ethnographic research with Latinx and students of color (Bernal, 1998; Haro & Martin, in review).

Site

Situated in the San Joaquin Valley, this dissertation study focused on the experiences of seven Latinx high school students and one Asian American high school student in navigating their college search and application process. The selection of this diverse and culturally rich region of California was informed by the nascent literature examining the unique barriers students from this region encounter in pursuing higher education (Contreras, 2015; Núñez, 2019; Puente et al., 2023; Puente & Vélez, 2023) and my desire to center the experiences of students from the San Joaquin Valley, of which I was one.

Positionality

I am a first-generation immigrant and college student, born in San Juan de Los Lagos, Jalisco and raised in the San Joaquin Valley. My family and I moved to the San Joaquin Valley when I was three years old. I attended all my pre-K-12 schooling in Bakersfield, California and grew up surrounded by agriculture. Because my father was a farm worker and we were English Language Learners (ESL), my siblings and I participated in the Migrant Education Program, a program geared to support and assist migrant children develop English language proficiency skills in schools. Throughout my schooling I had various people in my corner– my parents, community, educational/academic programs, teachers, and other institutional agents– that were dedicated to my success and the success of other students like me. While I faced many barriers akin to those of many peers, I was able to excel academically and attend a top-tier research university because of my family, community, and institutional agents.

During my senior year of high school I was enrolled in a college preparatory government class. That semester alone we received a visit from a for-profit institution and two army recruiters; it was common to see people walk around our campus in army uniforms. I remember

feeling uneasy and skeptical about these visits as visits from for-profit institutions or army recruiters were not a regular occurrence in any of my AP or Honors classes. My interactions in high school with other postsecondary institutions, whether virtual or in person, were minimal at best. The only college or university I had the opportunity to visit in high school was UC Santa Barbara through the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), which is why UC Santa Barbara became my top college choice. My college decision may have been different had I been presented with other information including recruitment visits, pamphlets, emails, and/or other promotional matter from different colleges and universities. I was fortunate to be placed in advanced courses, but had I been tracked in general or college preparatory classes, my educational trajectory may have been different. Fortunately, that was not the case, but it is the case for several of my peers who, for various reasons, are steered into different educational and career paths, including vocational institutions or the armed forces.

This study focuses on the digital advertising practices of students from the San Joaquin Valley– the southern region of California's Central Valley– who live at the margins and are often ignored. As someone who grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, I am privy to the structural barriers students from this area experience and understand the nuances and complexity of these realities– nuances an outsider might be oblivious to. My responsibility as a researcher and investment in my community pushed me to move beyond conventional researcher reflexivity to consider the contradictions in my identities as a researcher, Ph.D. candidate, first-generation immigrant, and first-generation college student from the San Joaquin Valley. I memoed throughout my time working with collaborators to grapple with these contradictions. I sought ways to minimize harm and use my social and cultural capital to assist collaborators in their educational goals. For these

reasons, I was committed to volunteering in the college lab at the school and meeting with collaborators to provide feedback on their college applications and essays.

Collaborators

Using purposeful sampling, I recruited high school juniors who were in the process of searching for and applying to colleges and universities (Patton, 1999). Through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1999), collaborators were carefully selected based on several parameters, including their intent to apply to colleges and universities and high academic achievements, including a minimum 3.0 GPA, a requirement for college admissions to a UC institution. Students were integral to my study. Not only did they assist me in collecting the advertisements they received, but they also shared critical aspects of their lives with me for over a year. In my engagement with students, I gained in-depth knowledge of how they made sense of the advertisements and information from colleges and universities. Haro (2022) referred to her participants as compañeras (friend/colleague) in her two-year critical ethnography of school push-out factors of Latina high school students. In discussing the use of compañera she writes, "Referring to Valentina as a compañera acknowledged her role in the research process and in turn, informed the care for her holistic life beyond a 'research participant.'" (p. 36). Other scholars using CFE acknowledge collaborators as "co-constructors" of knowledge (Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020). In this vein, I aim to honor participants in my study as "co-collaborators and co-creators" by sharing their knowledge and insight into their experiences and referring to them as collaborators (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1

Collaborator Demographics

Pseudonym	Age*	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Household Income	GPA (weighted)	Parent's Education Level	College Aspirations
Amíra	17	Latina/ Chicana	Girl	$50,000-$59,999	4.0	Middle School/ High School Degree	Vocational School, 4-year University
Andrés	16	Latino/ Chicano	Boy	$75,000-$99,999	4.5	Middle School/ Some College	4-year University
María	16	Latina/ Chicana	Girl	$30,000-$39,999	3.9	Vocational School/ Associates Degree	4-year University
Sage	17	Asian/ Southeast Asian	Girl	$20,000-$29,999	4.34	Middle School/ High School Degree	4-year University
Sally	16	Latina/ Chicana	Girl	$50,000-$59,999	3.9	Middle School/ Middle School	4-year University
Vivian	17	Latina/ Chicana	Girl	$10,000-$19,999	3.9	Middle School/ Law School (not in U.S)	4-year University
Ximena	16	Latina/ Chicana	Girl	$50,000-$59,999	4	Middle School/ Some High School	Community College, 4-year University
Yatziri	17	Latina/ Chicana	Girl	$20,000-$29,999	4.5	Middle School/ Associates Degree	Community College, 4-year University

**Note*. Responses reported at the beginning of the study in Jan./Feb. 2023

Data Collection Timeline

I began recruiting participants in December 2022. Initially, I attended public sporting events across schools in the district, and then I resorted to word-of-mouth and shared my flyer on social media. Students interested in participating in the study had to complete a screening questionnaire to determine their eligibility. As mentioned above, the criteria to participate in this study included: 1) participants had to be a high school junior during the spring 2023 semester, 2)

engaged in the process of college search and/or college applications during the time of data collection (spring 2023 - spring 2024), and 3) be in good academic standing. Additionally, because this study focused on digital technologies used for college search/application, a condition to participation was having access to a smartphone or digital device with internet service at home. Students who met the eligibility criteria and were interested in participating in the study were administered a demographic questionnaire to obtain more demographic information, including their race/ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, academic history, and educational goals. While some questions on the demographic questionnaire were optional, this information was critical to getting to know collaborators better. My data collection consisted of pláticas, participant observations, a collection of advertisements, and a focus group interview.

Pláticas

I used pláticas as both a method and methodology centering the ways of knowing (epistemologies) and experiences of Latinx and students of color's engagement with digital technologies and advertisements in their college application process (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). Thus, the five principles of pláticas as outlined by Fierros & Bernal (2016) allow for a shared space of co-creation, including using Chicana/Latina feminist theories to center the intersectional experiences of Chicana/Latinas in education and across social domains, honoring collaborators as co-constructors of knowledge and meaning-making, connecting research to the everyday realities of participants, providing a potential space for healing, and engaging in critical reflexivity and reciprocity to build trust with collaborators (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Puente & Vélez, 2023). While I engaged in several one-on-one informal pláticas with collaborators over a

year, I conducted two recorded pláticas– one during the spring semester of their junior year and the other during the spring semester of their senior year. In the first recorded plática, I focused on setting the context of students' lives– how their lived experiences shaped their interests and educational aspirations– and how they engaged with digital technologies to search for and apply for college. Questions honed in on ways students interacted with digital technologies, including search engines, social media sites, and college websites in their college search process. In the second plática, students reflected on how they engaged with and made sense of the advertisements and online college-related content they received during their college search and application process.

Participant observations

Over 14 months, I engaged in over 130 hours of participant observations. I met with students in their homes and sometimes observed them searching for college information and working on their college applications using their devices. Most of my engagements with collaborators were informal pláticas, where we talked for hours about different aspects of the college application process. During these pláticas, I often provided feedback on college essays, checked in about the ads they received in real-time, and discussed different questions collaborators had about the college process. I gathered over one hundred memos and field notes from these interactions and pláticas with collaborators.

Document/Advertisement Collection

Collaborators assisted me in collecting 2,126 screenshots and screen recordings of digital advertisements they received related to college. Each collaborator was given a unique link to a

box folder where they uploaded their ads. Collaborators collected advertisements primarily through email and social media ads on Instagram and TikTok. A handful of ads included search engine results pages, YouTube, and Pandora.

Group Plática

Lastly, I conducted a group plática with five collaborators at the beginning of their spring semester in January 2024. This group plática aimed to understand how students made sense of the digital advertisements they received during their college application process. Given the nature of a group plática, collaborators were informed that I could not guarantee their privacy and confidentiality in this group setting, but strongly encouraged them to respect the privacy of others and keep what was shared in the group plática private. The group plática lasted about 1.5 hours, except for one collaborator who had to leave 15 minutes early. Students were encouraged to share and reflect on their experiences and any observations they made as they engaged in the college search and application process.

Data Analysis

Qualitative coding

The qualitative analysis processes, as Miles et al. (2013) suggest, enable the qualitative researcher to develop codes that assign meaning to the data. They write, “Codes are prompts or triggers for deeper reflection on the data’s meanings. Coding is thus a data condensation task that enables you to retrieve the most meaningful material, to assemble chunks of data that go together, and further condense the bulk into readily analyzable units” (p. 73). I began my analysis of the pláticas with collaborators through open coding, also referred to as initial coding.

Initial coding allowed an open-ended process where I inductively derived codes to remain open to different theoretical directions of the data (Saldaña, 2019). During this initial coding process, I used MAXQDA, an online qualitative software, to develop In Vivo codes to capture language used by collaborators. In Vivo coding refers to "a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" so that verbatim language is used to convey the meaning of participant's experiences (Saldaña, 2019, p. 106). My dissertation study is rooted in a critical Chicana/Latina Feminsta praxis of honoring the knowledge and expertise of my collaborators (Bernal, 1998; Saldaña, 2019). Research question 2 is concerned with how students make sense of the digital advertisements they receive in their college application process. Their authentic thoughts and discussion around these topics are critical for this study and, ultimately, why I chose initial coding and In Vivo coding approaches during my first cycle of coding. After the first cycle coding process, I organized and assembled the codes through two phases of code mapping. Code mapping is a process that allows for the development of initial categories of codes and the creation of sub-sub codes as a preliminary analysis to help transition to second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2019). One approach to code mapping includes organizing and reorganizing codes through categorization. For example, first cycle codes were organized in a list, thus allowing me to group and visualize connections and form categories connected to the research questions. This code mapping process helped me transition to axial coding of the data. Through axial coding, I engaged in an iterative process of reviewing the data and code mapping to identify linkages in how categories and subcategories related to one another (Saldaña, 2019). To assist in visualizing these connections, I organized categories and quotes from collaborators in a spreadsheet, making connections through individual and collective experiences.

Critical Discourse Analysis

I conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the relationship between discourse around the marketing of pre-college programs and how it informed students' perceptions about these programs in connection to their college application process. Fairclough's CDA approach focuses on the dialectical relations between discourse and power and their effects on other social elements (e.g., power relations, institutions, social identities, etc.) (Fairclough, 2013a, 2013b). According to Fairclough (2013b), discourse refers to spoken or written language and other semiotic communication practices (e.g., photography, non-verbal communication). In this respect, language is viewed and theorized as a social practice– that is, language as a mode of action that is both socially shaped and socially constitutive. He writes, "It is vital that critical discourse analysis explore the tension between these two sides of language use, the socially shaped and the socially constitutive… Language use is always simultaneously constitutive of (i) social identities, (ii) social relations and (iii) systems of knowledge and belief- though with different degrees of salience in different cases" (Fairclough, 2013b, p. 92). In using CDA, I examine the relationship between discourse in advertising of pre-college programs and how it shapes students' perceptions of college. Fairclough (2013b) discusses three characteristics that make up CDA, including (1) an interdisciplinary systematic analysis of the relationship between discourse and social processes, (2) a systematic analysis of texts, and (3) an analysis that addresses social wrongs in discursive aspects and ways to reimagine and mitigate those wrongs. I draw on Fairclough's analytic approach to CDA in my analysis of pre-college programs in Chapter 4.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is the pervasive and spontaneous nature of digital device use and engagement with online technologies among the collaborators. As many interactions occurred in the moment, I was unable to observe or capture every online encounter, which made it challenging to fully document these practices. Additionally, I was not granted permission to conduct research at the high school, which meant I could not observe the collaborators in their classrooms or in the computer lab while they worked on their college applications. Another limitation involved the significant labor required of the collaborators to capture screenshots or screen recordings of every advertisement they encountered. As a result, it is likely that many ads were not collected, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of the data. Future studies should consider methodologies that reduce the burden on research participants in order to improve the accuracy and completeness of ad collection.

Organization of the Dissertation

In Chapter 2, I introduce the college-*conocimiento* framework, which draws on Chicana/Latina theory and college choice literature to explore the cyclical and non-linear pathways Latinx students and students of color navigate in the college decision-making process (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Collaborators engage with various digital technologies and devices within a *nepantla* search process—an in-between space where they explore and negotiate college information. In this *nepantla* space, collaborators employ different strategies for gathering information, including using Google search, visiting college websites, and engaging with social media platforms. These practices form the foundation for how students integrate online search into their broader college application process, shaping their decisions and perceptions about potential college choices.

In Chapter 3, I examine how collaborators made sense of the college advertisements and online information they encountered during their college application process. I explore how their online behaviors and digital trace data influenced the types of advertisements and social media content they were subsequently exposed to. Collaborators shared how they processed and interpreted these digital messages, noting that while some advertisements sparked curiosity and engagement, others felt overwhelming or irrelevant, ultimately complicating their decision-making process. This chapter highlights the varying ways in which students engage with digital content and the impact these interactions have on shaping their perceptions of college opportunities.

In Chapter 4, I analyze advertisements for pre-college programs, using a critical discourse analysis to examine both the content of the ads and students' perceptions of them. My findings reveal that most advertisements offer limited contextual information, which contributes to students' skepticism and distrust of these programs. Additionally, while all of the pre-college programs required substantial fees for participation, none of the advertisements disclosed the costs upfront. This lack of transparency not only reinforces the marketization of these programs but also exemplifies the dynamics of academic capitalism, where financial considerations are obscured, and the focus remains on promoting the programs as desirable opportunities without addressing their economic barriers.

CHAPTER 2: NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE: HOW HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS STRUCTURE THEIR COLLEGE SEARCH AND ENGAGE WITH ONLINE CONTENT

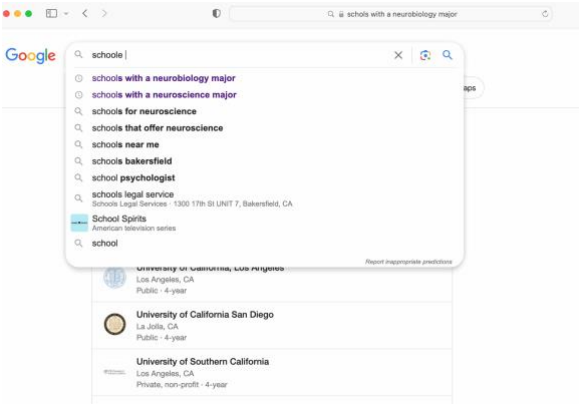
Vivian fires up her Google search engine and types in the words “schoole with a bs…” and before she can type the rest of her query or fix her typo, the Google autocomplete algorithm suggests “schools with a bs/md program.” In addition to other factors, the Google autocomplete algorithm recommends queries based on Vivian’s past search history (“How Google autocomplete predictions work,” n.d.). Vivian’s last two searches, as displayed in the purple font on the drop-down Google search history bar, include “schools with a neurobiology major” and “schools with a neuroscience major” (see Figure 2.1). She clicks on the first suggested search for “schools with a bs/md program.” The first four results on the results page are sponsored web pages for “4 to 7 year MD paths - St George’s University”, “Health Science Bachelor’s Grand Canyon University,” “6 Year Medical School Program - USA Medical School Model,” from the American University of Antigua, and “How to Pick BS/MD Programs and a College List|..” from MedSchoolCoach. She keeps scrolling down through a Google recommended list of nine schools “From across the web”, including Brown University, Case Western Reserve University, Baylor University, University of Rochester, University of Pittsburgh, Drexel University, Albany Medical College, Florida Atlantic University, Drexel University College, and a button to show “15 more”. Right below the list is a web page for “A Complete List of All BS/MD Programs in 2023” from the website CollegeVine (see Figure 2.1). She clicks on it.

The webpage opens up to a table of contents highlighting different sections of the page. Vivian pauses for nine seconds on the section titled, “How Hard Is It to Get Into BS/MD

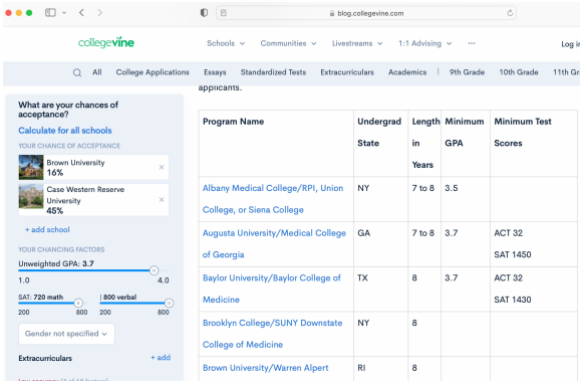
Programs?" hovering over the "…acceptance rates very low, ranging from 1 to 10 percent". She continues down to the next section, "List of All BS/MD Programs." This list sorts all programs by alphabetical order and includes information in a table format for the name of the program, undergraduate state (some programs pair students with institutions in the Caribbean), length of the program in years, minimum G.P.A required to apply, and the minimum ACT and SAT test scores accepted. For the next five minutes, she scrolls down this list of programs, at times stopping a few seconds longer for certain programs (e.g., Howard, Brown University).

Figure 2.1

Screenshots of Vivian's search for "schools with a bs/md program"



A. Google search "schools"



B. College Vine website

This description of Vivian's eight-minute screen recording of her searching for BS/MD programs on June 4, 2023, provides a small glimpse into her process of searching for college information. In this chapter, I find that students readily use Google search and social media platforms for college research and information gathering in their college search process. While there is a substantial body of work on inequitable access to college knowledge and resources for

marginalized students (Bell et al., 2009; McDonough, 1998; Perna, 2006; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006), little is known about how students utilize digital technologies and platforms in their college choice process. This first empirical chapter focuses on students' digital college information-gathering processes informing their subsequent college decisions (see Chapter 3). The digital technologies and platforms students engage with to obtain information about college can structure their college choices and constrict their college access opportunities. This chapter contributes to the college choice literature in how students structure their college search process, engaging with digital technologies and platforms. First, I introduce college choice frameworks and models in framing this study within the broader scholarship. Second, I review scholarship that focuses on the interlocking systems of oppression impacting students' college access and choices. In the following section, I introduce the conceptual college-*conocimiento* framework to expand on the ways Latinx students and students of color engage in a digital *nepantla* space as they process college information over the course of their college search and application process. In situating this scholarship, I present findings on how students structure their digital *nepantla* search process in gathering college information. My findings uncover how students' digital *nepantla* of gathering online college information trigger feedback loops of information (e.g., search results, social media content, advertisements), and this information influences students' subsequent searches and online engagement with content, ultimately informing their college knowledge.

College Choice Models and Perspectives

Scholarly frameworks of college choice have evolved and developed across different fields, including economics, psychology, sociology, and integrated perspectives. The interest in

understanding the college choice processes of students led scholars in the 1980s to develop theories and models with this objective (Bergerson, 2009). The economics of education literature, for example, situates college choice from a microeconomics perspective that adapts the theory of the firm to decisions by individuals (Becker, 1994). Deciding if, when, and where to go to college is an investment in higher education and a form of human capital (Long, 2007; Paulsen, 2001). Human capital, simply put, is the educational investment individuals make that increases their quality of life– productivity, earning potential, improved health, and reduces the likelihood of unemployment (Becker, 1994; Long, 2007). Therefore, according to this model, students become rational decision-makers by considering the investment in higher education, human capital (e.g., earnings, job opportunities, and stability, etc.), to the costs of going to college (e.g., tuition, living expenses, effort, foregone earnings) (Long, 2007; Paulsen, 2001).

Challenging this perspective, scholars argue that students do not have access to complete and accurate information to calculate the expected net benefits of which institution to choose (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005). Additionally, students make college decisions based on subjective preferences that stray from typical economic models (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005). DesJardins and Toutkoushian (2005) note the discrepancy of individual preference in rational choice theory. They write, “Since the utility of any given good or service, such as education, can vary across individuals, we may observe two people making very different consumption choices, yet both could be acting rationally.” (p. 214). While economic factors play a big role in students’ college choices, financial decisions about college are only one factor of many impacting the college choices of students from marginalized backgrounds. In line with

rational choice theory, Hossler & Gallagher (1987) proposed a college choice model to understand students' college choice process.

Hossler & Gallagher (1987) propose a three-phase model of college choice, including the predisposition, search, and choice phases. During the predisposition phase, Hossler and Vesper's (1999) nine-year longitudinal study found that decisions to attend college are made during the middle school years. This pivotal moment is often informed and influenced by parents as they guide and support students in their aspirations for college. Especially relevant to this chapter is the search stage of college choice, typically taking place in the 10th and 11th grades, when students and parents gather information about the college process to aid students in identifying a "college choice set" or the list of schools they are interested in applying to (Hossler & Vesper, 1999). At this juncture, students begin to rely more on the support from their teachers and guidance counselors and work towards meeting the academic requirements for college admissions (e.g., test preparation, enrolling in AP/Honors courses). Lastly, in the college choice phase, students and parents navigate the college choice decision process by assessing the information gathered and available to them, submitting applications to the final college choice set, and evaluating financial aid packages in deciding if and where to enroll (Hossler & Vesper, 1999). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model delineates sequential steps in students' college choice processes. Subsequent scholarship discusses the factors that shape student decision-making.

Within sociology, perspectives on college choice have adopted theories of cultural capital (McDonough, 1997, 1998; Roksa & Robinson, 2017). One sociological perspective of college choice situates the role of cultural capital, socioeconomic class, and organizational school

contexts in structuring college access opportunities and, in turn, students' college choices (McDonough, 1997). Cultural capital is the intergenerational transmission of symbolic goods– attributes, behaviors, preferences, and knowledge– shared by dominant status groups to preserve power and status (Bourdieu, 1986; McDonough, 1997). McDonough (1998) employs Bourdieu's concept of habitus, a common set of subjective perceptions and behavioral dispositions associated with members of particular groups that shape "an individual's expectations, attitudes, and aspirations" to study how schools, social class, and cultural capital structure college opportunities (p. 184). Thus, habitus influences students' decision-making within organizational contexts in that students identify college choices they deem appropriate according to learned social and cultural expectations in their environment (McDonough, 1998). In this respect, a school's college-choice organizational culture shapes students' college choices and their college access in terms of the type and quality of organizational resources available to them (e.g., curriculum, college counseling, material resources, professional networks, and letters of recommendation) (McDonough, 1998). Holland's (2019) ethnographic study builds on McDonough's (1998) class analysis and finds that high school counselors and college admissions officers are key actors in fortifying unequal paths to college for students from different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. She writes,

> Students' lack of college information and the ways the schools broker connections unequally to different types of colleges were key in influencing differential college outcomes. Although all students experienced marketing, the schools played an important brokering role in how they connected students to colleges of varying levels of selectivity… Less advantaged students were encouraged to attend instant admissions

> events, which offered opportunity, but a lack of information, and instead contributed to students' beliefs that attendance at any four-year college was the ultimate goal. College representative sessions on the other hand were more intimate opportunities for students to meet a representative one on one and gain information and make a social tie, as opposed to being pressured to apply and gain an acceptance (p. 112)

Different from previous economic models of college choice, the sociological perspective situates schooling environments as structural barriers impacting students' college choices (Holland, 2019; McDonough, 1997).

In merging both economic and sociological perspectives, Perna (2006) proposes a model of college choice to examine how an individual's assessments of the benefits and costs of investing in college (rational choices) are informed by their habitus, contextual (e.g., school, community, and higher education) and policy factors. Perna's (2006) model argues that individual and external factors mediate students' college decisions. The first layer, habitus, includes demographic characteristics, cultural capital, and social capital. The second layer, school and community context, includes institutional resources and student support. The third layer, higher education context, includes institutional characteristics and marketing and recruitment efforts. The last layer consists of the economic, social, and political climate influencing student's college choices. While critical to our understanding of college choice in situating individual and external factors impacting students' decisions, Perna (2006) and the proposed college choice models discussed above lack an examination of interlocking systems of oppression and dynamics of power differentially impacting students' college access and their college decisions (McLewis, 2021; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006). To this end, scholars argue that

college choices are influenced by factors impacting college access (Bergerson, 2009; McLewis, 2021).

College choice and interlocking systems of oppression

Traditional models of college choice discuss individual-level factors (e.g., academic preparedness), socioeconomic factors, and social and political factors informing and impacting college choice (e.g., Perna, 2006) but fail to examine how the intersection of different systems impacts students' college opportunities and choices (McLewis, 2021; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006). Challenging these perspectives, McLewis (2021) employs Black feminist scholarship to argue that the intersection of multiple forms of oppression (e.g., racism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, classism, and sexism) and the structural domain of higher education stifles college opportunities and the college choices of Black women and girls. She argues that the structural domain of institutions of higher education organizes domination while enrollment management practices maintain inequality through "bureaucracy and surveillance" in deciding "who belongs and who does not" (p. 120). From this perspective, McLewis (2021) connects the college choice literature to the literature on college access in arguing that systems of oppression create the social conditions that structure the lives and college choices of students from marginalized identities broadly, and Black women and girls specifically (McLewis, 2021).

Building on McLewis's (2021) work, other scholarship has furthered our understanding of the structural barriers impacting students' college choices, including how students' geographical locations impact where they apply and enroll in college (Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman, 2016; Tate IV, 2008). Dache-Gerbino (2018) study, in particular, argues that college locations are intentional, shaped, and socially constructed through the social, political, and

historical disenfranchisement of marginalized communities. These geographies of unequal college opportunities not only apply to urban localities; scholarship at the nexus of rural geographies and students' college choice argue that students residing in rural areas are constricted by the lack of postsecondary choices and live in "college deserts" (Hillman, 2016, p. XX; Tate IV, 2008). Problematizing this scholarship, however, Puente et al. (2023) found that students from a rural area in the San Joaquin Valley of California chose institutions close to home because they sought a sense of racial and spatial familiarity, wished to pursue majors to give back to their community, and prioritized a tight-knit collegiate environment. Indeed, students from marginalized backgrounds make decisions that are in tune with how they perceive their college opportunities, including the accessibility of postsecondary institutions near them (Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman, 2016). As such, McLewis (2021) challenges traditional college choice models that do not seriously interrogate the role of higher education in limiting college opportunities through deliberate efforts to hand-pick which students to recruit.

On the supply side, institutions structure college opportunities through their enrollment management and recruiting behaviors. Salazar et al. (2021) find that institutions perpetuate socioeconomic, racial, and geographic disparities in prioritizing off-campus recruiting visits in affluent, predominantly White, out-of-state high schools. To McLewis's (2021) argument, off-campus recruiting visits function as a surveillance tool in deeming who is worth visiting. While traditional college choice literature discusses barriers to college opportunities, institutions of higher education stymie college access and college choices in their strategic enrollment management and marketing and recruiting efforts.

The gamut of college choice literature introduces frameworks and models delineating the steps in the college choice process (e.g., pre-search, search, choice) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) and factors impacting how students make their decisions about college (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006). While varying perspectives on the steps, process, and factors impacting college choice, there is general consensus on how students access information about college, typically referred to as the "college search" phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). To different degrees, the literature argues students garner information and resources about college from parents and family (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008), institutional agents like teachers and guidance counselors (McDonough, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2011) , and communication with institutions through recruiting visits, college visits, email, and direct mail (Holland, 2019; Stevens, 2007). A small but growing literature examines how students use online resources to gather information about college (Shamsuddin, 2024), including looking at rankings on the US News & World Report to select colleges to apply to Kim & Gasman (2011), using college access web tools sponsored by prominent organizations like College Board (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013), and searching for information about financial aid (Venegas, 2006). While the rampant availability of college resources exists online, students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, encounter challenges in making sense of the information they are receiving online, further exacerbating barriers to college (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013; Shamsuddin, 2024; Venegas, 2006). Missing from this literature is an analysis focused on the other side of the coin: how postsecondary institutions, vendors, digital technologies, and platforms structure the information students have access to. This first empirical chapter hones in on how students interact with digital technologies and platforms in the college search process to gather information about college. As I discuss below, this information-gathering process continues

throughout students' college choice processes, and situating this process is critical to students' subsequent college decisions, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.

Conceptual framework: College-*conocimiento* and the search for college knowledge

College choice literature has been discussed in a linear, sequential process, whereas Acevedo-Gil (2017) argues Latinx students navigate the college choice process in a cyclical, often non-linear manner, negotiating and reflecting on access to institutional resources and their intersectional identities.

Acevedo-Gil (2017) proposes a college-*conocimiento* framework, applying Perna's (2006) model of college choice and Anzaldúa's (2002) theory of *conocimiento* to understand the serpentine college-going process for Latinx students. Introduced earlier, the Perna (2006) model of college choice is a four-phase model in which students examine college choice opportunities through their habitus (e.g., values and beliefs), the school and community context, the higher education context, and macro-level social, economic, and policy contexts. Aiming to provide nuance to the intersectional experiences of Latinx students, Acevedo-Gil (2017) builds on Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento*, a seven-stage pathway of individual and epistemological development, an awakening of consciousness in which opposing realities co-exist, thus inspiring social action and change. In Anzaldúa's words:

> The snake is a symbol of awakening consciousness—the potential of knowing within, an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought. Often nature provokes un 'aja,' or '*conocimiento*,' one that guides your feet along the path, gives you el ánimo

> [courage] to dedicate yourself to transforming perceptions of reality, and thus the conditions of life. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540)

The first space in the pathway to *conocimiento*, according to Anzaldúa (2002) represents *el arrebato* or a metaphorical earthquake that ruptures a person's reality and sends them into a spiral of information-seeking (Anzaldúa, 2002). This first stage awakens *la facultad*, a sixth sense in the ability to see beyond the surface (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Anzaldúa, 2002). Once committed to a new reality, she navigates a liminal space, *nepantla*, where she grapples with opposing realities and becomes torn between dichotomies– the old and new world, tradition, and progression (Anzaldúa, 2002). It is in *nepantla* where she resides most of the time. "*Nepantla* is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family" (p. 548). In *coatlicue*, she becomes overwhelmed by the collision of two worlds and immobilized by despair. She breaks away from this despair and moves to *el compromiso* where she learns to transcend her fears, reckons with old identities, and begins the healing process. In the fifth space, *coyolxauhqui*, she takes rein of her life and reflects on her experiences to create a new reality. In the sixth space, a clash of realities, her newfound identity is challenged, and she is forced to come back to herself and seek resources. In the final space, the critical point of transformation, she comes prepared with an armor of tools to negotiate conflicts and tap into community and resources rooted in social activism (Anzaldúa, 2002). As she navigates the different spaces of *conocimiento*, she always comes back to *nepantla*, the Nahuatl word meaning "a transitional in-between space" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544).

Acevedo-Gil (2017) bridges these interdisciplinary perspectives to propose a college-*conocimiento* framework for Latinx students' college decision-making. College-*conocimiento* entails seven non-linear cycles: *el arrebato* in deciding to attend college; *nepantla* in searching for college information; *coatlicue* in anticipating college obstacles; *el compromiso* in planning and applying to college; *coyolxauhqui* in choosing a college; a clash of realities in navigating conflicts with college; and spiritual activism through self-advocacy, and peer support (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Developing a college-*conocimiento* is relevant to many Latinx students whose experience of racialized and oppressive schooling contexts informs their perspectives and beliefs about postsecondary education (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Huber et al., 2006). Moreover, researchers have used *nepantla* to examine the experiences of Latinx people navigating between multiple worlds in educational spaces (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Through *testimonio*, Prieto & Villenas (2012) theorize their practice as Chicana/Latina feminist educators navigating the paradoxes of the educational system and their home cultures to cultivate cultural self-awareness, responsibility, and commitment to themselves, their students, and families from non-dominant communities. Recently, the *nepantla* framework has been used to study the liminal spaces Latinx students navigate in their transition to college (Ramirez et al., 2023; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2023). Tichavakunda & Galan (2023) applied the *nepantla* framework to explore the literal and figurative transitional space first-generation Latinx students undergo in the summer before college, finding that students lacked institutional support over the summer months, leading many to switch schools and not enroll altogether. Related to the transition to college, Ramirez et al. (2023) apply *nepantla* to the experiences of Chicana/Latina students who participated in a summer bridge program and negotiated their racial, ethnic, and gender identities and the physical

spaces they took up in bridging between the old (responsibilities to their home) and new world (newfound academic expectations, responsibilities, and identities) of college.

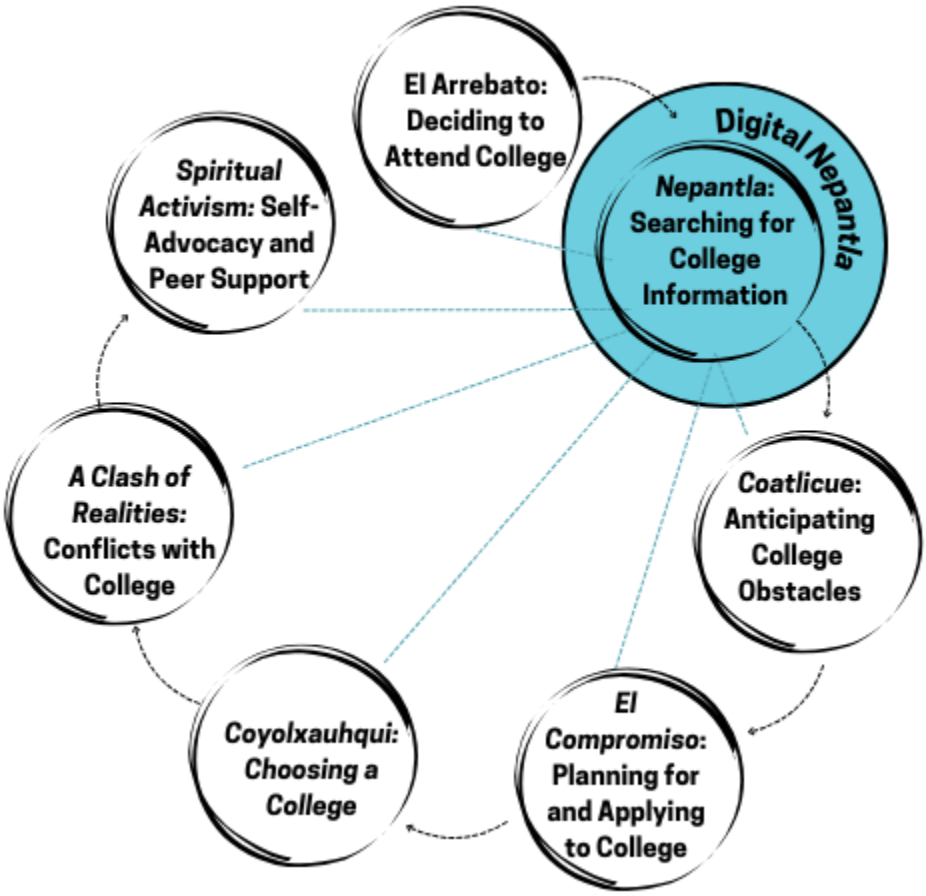
In this chapter and in Chapter 3, I find collaborators toggle between *nepantla*, a liminal, in-between space of searching for college information, particularly using digital technologies and platforms, *coatlicue* in anticipating barriers to college, *el compromiso* in planning for and applying to college despite anticipated challenges, and *coyolxauhqui* in choosing a college and for a couple of collaborators, reconsidering their college decision. Like Acevedo-Gil (2017), I argue students come back to the *nepantla* space of searching for college information in their college application process. However, I build on this to discuss how digital technologies and platforms play a critical role in the *nepantla* space and subsequent spaces of students' college-*conocimiento*, which I conceptualize as a digital *nepantla*. In this digital *nepantla* students engage with a new world of college search mediated by digital technologies.

In this chapter, I investigate how students engage with digital technologies in their college search and, in turn, the type of information made available by digital technologies and platforms informs students' college search and application decisions. Different from Hossler & Gallagher (1987), I find students' information-gathering process, their *nepantla* search space (Acevedo-Gil, 2017), is cyclical rather than sequential. In this digital *nepantla* space of college research, students interact with digital technologies and platforms; hence their college application process is imbued with online information that influences their decisions (see Figure 2.2). Not only do postsecondary institutions and vendors have an interest in recruiting students (EAB, 2018, 2022; Noel-Levitz, 2020b), but digital technologies (e.g., Google search) and social media platforms have an interest in promoting content that maximizes their advertising

algorithms (Hwang, 2020). By design, these recruiting and advertising mechanisms structure who gets access to and what type of college information can be consequential to students' college choices.

Figure 2.2

College-conocimiento Informed by Digital nepantla



Furthermore, I find digital technologies transform how students learn about college (college search and application process) and how colleges recruit students (e.g., strategic

enrollment management). Previous literature finds despite using online resources in their college search process, students, particularly from underrepresented backgrounds, have trouble making sense of the information they are receiving online (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013; Shamsuddin, 2024; Venegas, 2006). This emerging scholarship has examined how digital technologies can promote existing barriers to college access in the disorienting information available online, but it has not examined how digital technologies also function like a structure in deciding what information gets prioritized to students and how this affects the college choice process. Therefore, I bridge the college choice and access literature by arguing digital technologies function as a structure impacting both. This chapter focuses on the college search, *nepantla* space of information gathering, and Chapter 3 discusses how digital technologies and advertisements affect different spaces in students' college-*conocimiento* (Acevedo-Gil, 2017), including *nepantla* searching for college information, anticipating college obstacles (*coatlicue*), planning for and applying to college (*el compromiso*), choosing a college (*coyolxauhqui*), and conflicts with college (a clash of realities).

Findings

Findings from this chapter shed light on the role of digital technologies and platforms in students' college search process. I start by situating and contextualizing students' support from institutional agents and families during the last semester of their junior year as I began working with them. These protective agents are key to students' predisposition towards college, and the information and messaging students receive about college from external agents, both institutional and familial, supplement students' college knowledge and decisions about college, particularly

when the online information collaborators are receiving are at odds or provide an entirely different perspective than institutional agents.

Setting the context: Sources of support in collaborators' college search process

I began working with collaborators at the beginning of the year in January and February of 2023. In the subsequent months, I conducted the first recorded plática and several informal pláticas with collaborators. I met with each collaborator individually a few times to observe as they did their college research and, most times, to engage in pláticas about college, the college application process, interactions with digital platforms and advertisements, or to *comadrear* (Haro & Martin, in review). At this point, all collaborators were finishing their last semester of their junior year. A couple of them shared that their 11th-grade English teacher assigned them to work on two of their personal insight questions (PIQs). The PIQs are the essay component of the University of California application. Students can choose four out of eight questions to respond to in 350 words or less for each prompt. The PIQs were a big topic for students, and we discussed them extensively during our pláticas. I read and provided feedback on all collaborators' PIQs throughout our time working together. As I will discuss below, the PIQs and the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) applications were a primary focus for all students— largely because their college choice set mainly consisted of these institutions. To assist students in identifying schools, Amíra mentioned their English teacher had them use the Naviance platform to look up schools and create a list of schools they were interested in doing more research on. "We did, like we were assigned to do college searches. And we would use like Naviance or something like that. And that's when we would get

like, we would take quizzes and then they would link us to schools." Amíra shares during a group plática. I asked her if she noticed any changes after using Naviance, and she said:

> I would say, I think we used Naviance multiple times in high school, it was just like that period. And I did [notice changes], I would get emails from, from schools that like I got linked to, I remember that, but I don't remember what specific schools since the following year, it was like, starting, like college applications started. So that's where I started getting bombarded by more like emails. So I couldn't really like tell the difference between which ones were from Naviance. And which ones were from, like, College Board or? Or I don't know, or just in general. So, I think, yeah, I remember getting emails from colleges when I used Naviance the first time. And it just got overwhelming from there.

In sharing her college search process, Amíra recalls being introduced to the Naviance platform as a way to get matched with schools based on her responses to "quizzes" she was encouraged to take. While she could not recall the schools she was linked to, she remembers receiving emails from these schools and then being inundated with emails from more schools once "college applications started." This echos findings from investigative reporting by Feathers (2022) showing that the Naviance platform, used by two-thirds of American high schoolers, allows colleges and universities to target students with paid advertisements encouraging students to apply to their schools. In the same group plática and on separate occasions, María and Yatziri also associated the emails they received from colleges and universities with their engagement with platforms like Naviance and College Board. At this point in collaborators' search process– spring semester of their 11th-grade year– talk about advertisements or emails was present but not

as salient. As the college season for students progressed around the summer before their senior year, conversations about email and social media advertisements greatly increased and became "overwhelming" for most collaborators, as I discuss at length in Chapter 3. During their 11th-grade year, collaborators received support from their English teacher in drafting their college essays and conducting their own college research. Additionally, collaborators attributed their success to the support they received from a college preparatory program at their school.

Initially, all but one collaborator, María, was a part of this college preparatory program, a partnership with a four-year university in California. EISP provided students with yearly college field trips, workshops on different college navigational resources, one-on-one meetings with the site coordinator, Ms. Rendon, and a cohort-style learning community. Students interested in the program have to submit a Google interest form to provide Ms. Rendon with contact information and demographic and academic information to determine whether they are on track to complete their A-G requirements to apply to a four-year California university. The A-G requirements are a set of 15 college preparatory courses in English, mathematics, social studies, science, world language, visual and performing arts, and an elective required for freshman admission at a CSU or UC system (California Department of Education, 2024). Once students are identified as A-G on track, they could join EISP as early as 9th grade and continue with their cohort until their senior year if they choose to remain in the program. The curriculum for each cohort varied, and as students became seniors, their interactions with Ms. Rendon increased, and working on college applications became the focus. Ms. Rendon was integral in assisting students with their college application process. Given the role of school counselors in shaping students' college-going journeys (McDonough, 1997, 2005), counselor-to-student ratio (Goodman-Scott et al.,

2018), the availability of counselors (Robinson & Roksa, 2016), and the quality of counseling support are critical to college-going success, particularly for Latinx and Black students (Gast, 2022; Luti et al., 2009; Vela et al., 2016). As the only employee at the school with a guidance counselor-type role, Ms. Rendon's caseload consisted of approximately 230 students across grade levels. While collaborators engaged with Ms. Rendon, due to capacity and institutional constraints, most students at the school did not.

The information students were receiving from Ms. Rendon, their teachers, other institutional agents (counselor), and family (e.g., parents) (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Chapman et al., 2018; Kim & Gasman, 2011) informed their college search and application process and decisions. In fact, in the first recorded plática, collaborators shared that in addition to Ms. Rendon and other institutional agents, family, including parents, older siblings, and peers, informed and motivated their college aspirations and college choices. This is consistent with the literature speaking to the role of institutional and protective agents in students' educational journeys (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006). This is true for Latinx students' for which parents and siblings are immense sources of support in cultivating Chicana students' college aspirations (Ceja, 2006). In my first in-person meetings with collaborators and their parent(s) during the assent and consent process, I noted the level of curiosity, openness, and engagement parents directed toward me in my field notes. For example, parents shared personal stories about (in)access to education, immigration, language barriers, and their hopes for their children to pursue a higher education. Amíra's dad shared how he became involved– despite challenges navigating an unfamiliar education system– in learning about the college process and joining an after-school program offered to parents at the high schools to support Amíra and his other two

older daughters in going to college. He proudly boasted about a certificate he received for completing the program. His commitment and willingness to learn about college resources to support his daughters speak to the impact of father-daughter relationships on Latina daughters' higher education aspirations (Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020). While I focus on students' engagement with digital technologies and platforms in their college search process, it is important to note that students' decisions about college were not made in a vacuum and were informed by many factors, largely the support they received from their parents, siblings, and institutional agents like Ms. Rendon (McDonough, 1998).

All collaborators engaged with digital technologies and advertisements in their college search process. Pertinent to students' engagement with digital platforms and advertisements in their college choice process is situating their sociocultural backgrounds and access to the college information students received. Because students were part of EISP, collaborators had access to a college preparatory program, all were high achieving at the top 10% of their class, and had varying degrees of support from institutional and protective agents in their college pathways. Yet still, their choices about college and engagement with digital technologies did not always look the same. Different from the college choice and access literature is understanding how digital technologies structure students' college search, choice, and access— particularly for students from the San Joaquin Valley. While I discuss commonalities across collaborators' college choice journeys, I argue their stories as students from the SJV are not a monolith.

Sources of information in students' digital college search: Devices, Google search, and social media platforms

The college choice literature speaks to the college search as a critical and necessary step toward identifying a college choice set for college applications (Holland, 2020; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). While critical to college choice processes, our limited understanding of students' online search processes and engagement with digital devices comes from industry education research, including consultant firms, EAB, and Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL). A research report from RNL suggests a young generation of students are online and using their mobile devices for college research and, as such, recommend institutions adopt methods to optimize their digital engagement, including text messaging, outbound calling, mobile responsive emails, and websites (Noel-Levitz, 2020a).

Digital Devices: "I'll just usually use my phone"

In my pláticas and interactions with collaborators, I observed them use different devices for their college research. Often, when we met, they would use a larger device like an iPad, Google Chromebook, or laptop to make sure I was able to see their screen— particularly during my observations of their college searches or when I read and provided feedback on their PIQs or Common App essay prompts. Interestingly, when I asked collaborators directly about the devices they used for their college research, they shared they used their mobile devices for quick, in-the-moment searches and larger devices (e.g., iPad, Chromebook, or laptop) for more thorough searches. Below, Andrés discusses his process for searching for college information.

Patricia:	So, like, when you're doing that, your searches or you're just looking for information, typically, like what devices do you use, like cell phone, laptop, or Chromebook? Or what does that look like?
Andrés:	Usually, like, I'll just like, I won't be planning to look it up. Unless I'm like, okay, I'm gonna sit down and like, look this up. Yeah. But if not, I will just look it up on my phone. It's like a quick question. But if I look it

> up, and then my phone doesn't like, it doesn't show enough information, then I'll probably go on my computer and go deeper into the subject.

Andrés discusses how his college research typically is not planned, at least at this point during the spring of his 11th-grade year. He shares that when a quick question comes up, he looks it up on his phone. However, he uses his computer when he needs to look into something more deeply. This ad hoc process Andrés describes, such as using his phone for quick college searches is similar to what Yatziri and other collaborators shared. In response to my question about the devices she uses for college research, Yatziri shares, "So yeah, I mainly do use my phone because it's like, easier access. But I also use a laptop that I have. And recently, I just borrowed a Chromebook from school as well." The use of phones for college research was not something I directly observed because, as Andrés and Yatziri discuss, quick searches on their phone happened so often and in the spur of the moment. On at least two occasions, though, María did use her phone when she asked me for help in figuring out how to add schools to her Common Application (Common App) dashboard and how to log in to her UCLA Blackbaud account to apply for institutional UCLA scholarships. Aside from María, most collaborators shared they used larger devices for more in-depth college research, and some, like Amíra, Yatziri, and Andrés, did a lot of their college research at school using a Chromebook. "Most of the time, it's usually at school, where I have my questions about, like, certain colleges, or certain majors, sometimes you're like, 'How much does a psychologist make?' And I'll just search that up on a Chromebook." Amíra shared with me.

The devices collaborators use in their college research are critical to their college choice process. To understand how students gather information about college, we have to understand

what devices students use and how they use them. This argument is posed by Burrell & Fourcade (2021), who posit the digital and behavioral trace data collected through the devices we use and the ways we use them are fundamental to predictive algorithms that influence our behaviors because the coding elite would have us believe, these algorithms "know us better than we know ourselves" (p. 229). Burrell & Fourcade (2021) hone in on this by stating that,

> But the digital infrastructure operates in increasingly totalizing, continuous, and dynamic ways. Not only do digital data traces allow for intrusive probing by institutions far afield from the data's original collection site (e.g., credit data matter to landlords and to prospective romantic partners, and police departments are hungry for social media data), but they also enable the guiding or control of behavior through reactive, cybernetic feedback loops that operate in real time. The more one interacts with digital systems, the more the course of one's personal and social life becomes dependent on algorithmic operations and choices…As new data flow in, categories and classifications get dynamically readjusted, and so do the actions that computing systems take on the basis of those categories. (p. 227)

As demonstrated by education industry research, understanding students' college search and application processes, including the devices they use and what they do on those devices, is data that enables targeted marketing and recruiting efforts to move students down the enrollment funnel (EAB, 2018). Ultimately, these recommendations promote marketing strategies optimized for mobile searching and social media engagement (EAB, 2018) and, subsequently, the information and content students engage with to inform their knowledge and decisions about college. Key to the devices students use in their college search and arguably in their everyday

lives is understanding how students are using digital technologies to obtain information about college. In Chapter 3, I find students' search and online behaviors (i.e., their behavioral trace data) trigger feedback loops of information (e.g., search results, social media content, advertisements), and this information influences students' subsequent searches and online engagement with content, ultimately informing their college knowledge.

Google Search: Searching for "best colleges in…"

Critical to the devices collaborators used in their college search is the type of information collaborators sought and received in their college research. In pláticas with collaborators, they all shared that they used Google search engine, and a couple mentioned using Google search engine and Safari browser for their college research. "When I search something up?" Amíra responds to my question about the search engines she uses to look up information, "It's usually Google." Ximena responds similarly, "Like, when I have a specific question, I'll just go to Google and like, type it in." Vivian, Andrés, and Yatziri also mention using both Google and Safari browsers, at times interchangably. "I mostly was using Safari. Because it's what like is automatically on my phone. And sometimes Google because I worked on the school computers, which is technically [Google] Chrome," Vivian shares. While Vivian confuses Safari for a search engine, she is able to discern and distinguish Safari, her iPhone's default browser, and Google Chrome as the default browser running her Google searches when using the school computers. Because the default search engine for the Safari browser is Google, Vivian is using Google Search across all her devices (Grant, 2023). Vivian's observation exemplifies a recent ruling by Judge Amit P. Metha of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, stating that Google abused its power and monopoly over the search business, including paying Apple and Samsung

to be the default search engine (McCabe, 2024). Furthermore, the habitual nature of using Google search for quick-in-the-moment searches, particularly as it relates to college searches, is troubling. While I did not discuss Google's monopoly with collaborators, I did discuss the different search engines they might use in their college searches (e.g., Bing, Yahoo!). Yet collaborators' preferred search engine was Google. Noble's (2018) book argues that Google search is touted as an information tool for retrieval and knowledge production, but behind the curtain, it functions as an advertising machine where information is sold to the highest bidder, and the output is ripe with the ails of a society riddled with racism, sexism, and homophobia.

The screenshots from Vivian's search at the beginning of this chapter show sponsored web pages for two private international schools in the Caribbean, St George's University and American University of Antigua, and Grand Canyon University, a private for-profit institution. Sponsored advertisements on Google's search engine, for example, are delivered by Google Ads (formerly Google Adwords), a Google advertising platform where businesses can bid for particular keywords or phrases to bolster visibility in search queries on Google's search engine (How the Google Ads auction works, n.d.). For example, Taylor and Bicak (2020) find that while there is great variability within the institutional sector, private institutions buy more AdWords and pay more for AdWords (pay-per-click model) than public institutions. It is no surprise then that the sponsored pages from Vivian's search, and to a larger extent, sponsored content collaborators were engaging in (as I discuss in Chapter 3), came from private institutions. Furthermore, a student who does not have context and instrumental support (Venegas, 2006) on applying to international schools or for-profit institutions might find these sponsored webpages

confusing. The information that students are gathering from their Google searches informs their college research, and, as such, the college information they are privy to.

In describing how they used Google for their college research, collaborators share a mix of three approaches: 1) finding quick answers to questions on Google's featured snippets, 2) searching for college rankings websites, and 3) searching for specific colleges, universities, and majors. After these initial searches, a common approach collaborators employ is visiting a university website to gather statistics about a school. Amíra, Yatziri, and Sally share more about their process that echo similar statements from other collaborators.

Amíra describes her process of using Google search to answer her college-related questions. First, she types in a query on Google search, "What school is best for a psychology major? And from there, I kind of like, usually, it's the first website that pops up, it'll give me like a list. And I'll look through it, but I won't click on it…". Amíra continues and mentions using Google's Featured snippet, specifically the "People Also Ask" section, to get answers to some of her questions; she says:

> Or from there, it might be like, if that random thought were to pop up then I would like keep scrolling usually on Google because I would search up on Google. There would be like, more questions you know, I don't know if you've seen like the tabs where you would click on it and then a different question. Kind of like "How much does a psychologist make?" and then you click on it and then from there it gives you more questions. I feel like there's mostly where like I would get more like if I was still curious about certain like certain questions I had, then that's where I mostly get them answered. But like, looking for specific websites, maybe if I saw like a specific school that like kept

> popping up then yeah, I would go to their school website and search up like their graduation rate or if they're an impacted major, but besides that, I don't think I have like a specific, I don't know, schedule [my college search] or anything like that.

In sharing how she searches for college information, Amíra discusses her process of searching for information on Google and using the "People Also Ask" featured snippet to answer her questions and find answers to more questions that are related to her initial search. The way Google's Featured snippets work is by highlighting descriptive information of pages that Google's algorithm determines are a good fit for the search query (How Google's featured snippets work, n.d.). According to Google Search Central, users cannot mark their page as Featured snippets, the "Google systems determine whether a page would make a good featured snippet for a user's search request, and if so, elevates it" (Featured Snippets and Your Website, n.d.). By stating that the "Google systems determine" how pages get selected to be featured on a snippet promotes the obscurity of Google's algorithm and the obfuscation of digital technologies (Cottom, 2020). However, several web pages online, including one from the SEMrush blog, recommend ways to optimize content for a featured snippet, including identifying keywords that trigger a featured snippet and working to improve web page content (Gerrity, 2024).

The featured snippets encourage Amíra's cursory information-gathering as she describes using this feature as a quick way to answer her questions. The information she receives from these snippets informs her understanding of college-related questions without providing more context or nuance. A study examining the influence of featured snippets on user attitudes found users' pre-search attitudes on debated topics (e.g., obesity, school uniforms, intellectual property) changed after reading content expressed in the featured snippet (Bink et al., 2023). During these

quick searches, Amíra is not concerned with evaluating the quality of information she is getting, which is troubling given how much collaborators report using Google search in their college search process. That is not to say that Amíra entirely relies on this information in her college search process. As I discuss later, Amíra and other collaborators discuss ways they judge the information they receive online to be credible and supplement it with information garnered from institutional agents and other sources.

Similar to Andrés, Amíra does not schedule a time for college research at this point in her college search process. She uses Google search for responses to questions that may come up and, at times, will look at university websites to gather information about retention and if her intended major, psychology, is impacted at a school. Amíra learned about impacted majors from Ms. Rendon and other people, including her older sisters, who are both attending a four-year university. She followed Ms. Rendon's advice in identifying impacted majors and schools in her college search process. However, the information from Google's featured snippets may sway or dissuade Amíra and other students into specific fields or majors. To this point, Bink et al. (2023) note previous scholarship has found featured snippets reduce engagement with search results (SERPs) and increase user satisfaction and conclude that "it seems that users stick to the first viewpoint encountered and may not consider others, even if valid arguments could be made for both sides" (p. 218). Indeed, the obfuscation of how pages get ranked and selected in Google's featured snippet specifically and search engines broadly poses questions for the potential deleterious effect of these algorithms on students' college search processes and information gathering that inform subsequent college choices.

Yatziri's initial process of using Google for college information differs from Amíra. In the following conversation, I ask Yatziri to explain her process of searching for college information.

Patricia: …But like, say, for example, like, walk me through, like, what that looks like for you, if there's something that catches your attention, or like, "Oh, I want to look into like, this program" or whatever, like, what do you typically do?

Yatziri: I'll search up like, specifically, "All nursing programs in California" and stuff. And I'd see like, how from those lists, like, "Oh, these are the programs", or "These are the universities that offer those programs." And like other websites that show that like, oh, like "Top nursing programs," programs and stuff. And then so from there, I will take notes of those universities that do offer those programs, and I would go on a separate search tab, and I would search up those universities and see, like other programs they offer as well, their acceptance rate, and tuition and stuff like that. I'll look more broad like into that university or like colleges and stuff. And yeah, from there, I'll choose like, "Oh, maybe this is a good option." "Or maybe this one is not such a good option," and stuff. So yeah.

Patricia: And when you say like "search up," you mean like [you go on] Google or Safari?

Yatziri: Yeah, I'll use Google. Yeah. Safari.

In the excerpt above, Yatziri explains her process of searching for nursing programs, specifically in California. She begins by typing a query on Google for "Nursing programs in California" or something to that effect. The results from this query recommend webpages for "Top nursing programs" or college ranking websites similar to Vivian's search from earlier, focused on ranking programs and schools. After identifying top programs in California, she goes through another filtering process: looking through university websites and gathering information on their acceptance rate and tuition. Previous literature has found high achieving students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and college-educated parents are concerned with academic

reputation and prestige and use college-ranking websites like the US News & World Report to identify schools in their college search process (Kim & Gasman, 2011; McDonough, 1998). Different from the literature, Yatziri cared about receiving a quality education but was less focused on the prestige of the institution in her college search. She prioritized schools that met her criteria which broadly meant schools in close proximity with good nursing programs at a reasonable price. And these factors informed Yatziri's college search, including looking through college ranking sites to gather information about nursing programs.

This short excerpt from our plática alludes to Yatziri's anxiety about financing college, but what was not discussed in this recorded plática was her initial desire to stay close to home and attend the local community college to work and save money. In my early meetings with Yatziri, she expressed an interest in applying to the nursing program at the local community college. I asked if she would be willing to commute to school, and she responded, "Yes." I told her that she should consider applying to community colleges a driving distance she was comfortable with to increase her chances of getting accepted since "nursing programs are competitive in the Valley." From that early plática and onward, Yatziri began to discuss other schools she was considering in her college choice set further away from home. By October 2023, she shared she was applying to four UCs, four CSUs, and four local community colleges.

My suggestion that Yatziri expand her college options might have played a role in her applying to more schools in addition to the information she was receiving from Ms. Rendon and other institutional agents. However, her personal experiences with the loss of her father and brother at an early age and the resulting exorbitant health insurance costs motivated her to pursue a profession where she could help others in similar situations, provide financially for her mother,

sister, and nephew, and do so without incurring college debt. As such, her looking at nursing programs close to home and searching for universities' "acceptance rate, and tuition and stuff like that" was not incidental. Rather, her desire to stay close to home to save money and help her family financially informed her college research in identifying community colleges in California. This is important to mention because, as Acevedo-Gil (2017) argues, Latinx students' college search process is not linear and constantly evolves with information students receive from family, institutional agents, and peers. While Acevedo-Gil (2017) applies the college-*conocimiento* framework to Latinx students, students from marginalized communities also experience non-linear pathways to college, including Black students (Chapman et al., 2018) and Asian students (Kim & Gasman, 2011) receiving support from their parents in making their college decisions. However, this was not the case for Sage, the only collaborator who identified as Southeast Asian and did not receive support from her mother and family in applying to college. Ultimately, as I discuss below, Sage received support from institutional agents and peers and was met with a whole set of challenges forcing her to pivot and alter her plans for college.

Like Amíra and Yatziri, Sally also used Google for her college research, but her process for looking for college information was more narrowly focused. Sally shares she searches for specific schools and then programs or majors she is interested in. "Oh, so I usually just put the school and then like what I'm searching for, so if I'm looking for the majors, I just put like 'UCLA majors' or 'UCLA top majors' or 'UCLA College of Engineering.' Continuing the conversation about her process for looking for college information, she says the following:

> And yeah, actually last time I was I think I was looking at UCLA I forgot what I had searched but it was basically like the whole basically statistics of like the app of the of

> those students admitted… And it was just, broken up between like categories. And yeah, I actually got to see like the percentage of Hispanic students and then the percentage of women so I forgot what I had looked up though but I think it was something along the lines of "UCLA admission statistics" or something like that.

In addition to identifying schools and majors that aligned with her interest in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), Sally was also concerned with her experience as a brown woman. On several occasions, Sally and I talked about race, ethnicity, gender, and the experiences of first-generation students of color. During my first workshop at her school, Sally asked me before she agreed to participate in the study, if I had experienced racism in college. Her question stuck with me so much that I vividly recall it. Sally's awareness of race and racism continued to evolve during our time working together. After returning from her summer research program at a University of California campus, she talked about how challenging it was to keep up with the rigorous coursework and how out of place she felt as a first-generation student surrounded by "privileged people." She discusses the color of her skin and her ethnicity as another layer to the culture shock of her experience. She shares, "Some people might be able to assume I am first-generation, but being Latina is not something I can hide. I was the only brown girl in my track." As she extends her arm out in front of her.

Two other collaborators, Amíra and Sage came back from a similar summer research program at a UC with a new college-*conocimiento*, as I discuss further in Chapter 3. After experiencing this summer program, Sally, Amíra, and Sage experienced the third space, *coatlicue*, in which their expectations of college were altered, and they were forced to grapple with the dissonance of their college aspirations and likely obstacles in connection with their

intersectional identities (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). On separate occasions, all three expressed experiencing culture shock and the program's intensity that fueled their anxieties about college life. In these pláticas, I grew concerned that these experiences would discourage them from applying to a UC or four-year institution, but I validated their feelings and experiences and shared my own experience navigating culture shock and struggling to find my place in college. Without knowing it, I was offering a space where collaborators could share freely, reflect, and continue on the path of college-*conocimiento*, from *coatlicue* in anticipating college obstacles to *el compromiso* in planning and applying to college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Haro & Martin, in review). I did not sway from conversations about race, racism, class privilege, and microaggressions (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). At the same time, I shared finding community in student organizations, seeking support at the Education Opportunity Program, and cultivating mentee/mentorship relationships with staff and faculty of color incredibly improved my experience and sense of belonging in college. I recommended they seek support, join student organizations, and attend events to feel a sense of home. Sally's search for statistics on UCLA admissions and demographics was important to her college search process because of her intersectional identity as a first-generation college Latina student from a low-income background.

In referencing these UCLA statistics, Sally felt it important to learn more about the school's demographic makeup, such as the representation of Hispanic/Latinx students and women. From the first interaction with Sally at her school to the summer program she participated in and the numerous pláticas we had, her *conocimiento* of issues of race, racism, and multiple forms of subordination were salient to her and informed our pláticas and her college

search and choice process. Information on university websites and statistics are important sources of information, particularly for first-generation students of color from low-income backgrounds. Yet, statistics and the breakdown of admitted students on college websites are not always user-friendly, making it hard for students to make sense of (Shamsuddin, 2024). Furthermore, research suggests some universities concerned with the appearance of ethno-racial diversity on their campus engage in practices that produce "cosmetic diversity" or "revising and reframing their representation of race categories" (Ford & Patterson, 2019, p. 2). Holland & Ford (2021) found institutions classified as "most competitive" according to Barron's selectivity rankings were more likely to engage in practices to represent their ethno-racial diversity on their websites, while less selective institutions were less likely to represent their racial diversity on their website. However, cosmetic diversity can mask the experiences and sense of belonging of students from marginalized backgrounds on college campuses (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and hyper surveillance of students of color, particularly Black students (W. A. Smith et al., 2016). The statistics Sally was able to gather from UCLA only paint part of the picture; her desire to study engineering adds another layer to the diversity or, rather, lack of diversity she may experience as a Latina student in STEM (Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021).

Amíra, Yatziri, and Sally all describe similarities and differences in their college search process. Amíra uses the Google Featured snippet for quick information gathering and, at times, looks at certain university websites to gather statistics and information about particular schools and majors. Yatziri describes a broad-to-narrow approach of looking for top-ranked nursing programs in California and then identifying schools in which she can conduct further research. Through this process, she is interested in looking up statistics on acceptance rates and

information about tuition and financial aid. Sally begins her search at the school level, searching for specific schools she is interested in and then identifying majors and programs at these schools she would like to pursue. While all begin their college searches differently, once Amíra, Yatziri, and Sally find colleges and universities they are interested in, they take a deeper dive and search for statistics about the school that can provide information about impacted majors, affordability, and campus demographics. This quest for more college information is similar to Shamsuddin (2024), who finds that students sought information about the student experience in their college search and asked broad questions about campus and social life. All collaborators used Google search for their college research, but most also mentioned using social media platforms to aid in their college search process.

The double whammy: Google search and social media platforms

Students mention using social media sites and Google Search simultaneously in their college search process. For example, Vivian jokingly shares that she constantly uses TikTok for many things, including college research. “I mean, on TikTok. I’m really always on TikTok. [chuckles]” She continues and shares that she decided to apply to Brown University and hopes to write a good essay for the Common Application. In the excerpt below, she describes the advice she received from TikTok on writing her PIQ and Common App essays.

> They’re [content creators] always like, “When you’re writing your common app and your PIQs. It has it’s a long, semi-long process, because you can’t just do it in one sitting because it’s not going to be good! So you brainstorm; you start planning it out once you know what you want to write. You write it in a part, and then you take a break from it, you write it again, and then you review it, edit it and send it out to other editors. And then

once you get that feedback, you finish it and review review review until it fully convinces you," So that's… I feel like that's the perfect time to do that, is summer.

Vivian shares arguably good advice she received from TikTok content creators on how to draft her college application essays. Later, in the same plática, I asked her to explain her process of searching for information online since she had previously told me about a video she saw on TikTok that prompted her interest in undergraduate programs with early acceptance to medical school.

> Patricia: If you can, kind of walk me through or give me an example of like… I know that one time when we were on Zoom, you said, you know, "I saw this video on TikTok about flexmed programs. And then I started searching it up, like on Google or whatever". So so when you're doing your research, what do you do? Like do you search something on Google? Do you see it first on social media and then, just an example of what it looks like.
>
> Vivian: Okay flexmed, it's this um, she's [content creator] currently a… she's currently doing her undergrad. I don't know what her program is under though I know she's in her undergrad. She's already got into the Icahn School of Medicine through flexmed and she's promoting it. Not that they're paying her she's just letting students know, "Hey, if you're like 100% sure you want to be a doctor apply to this you can do it you your sophomore year, junior year, second, or third year". And so I saw that and searched it up and was like "oh this is cool". And she was like the "that there's other like variants or different programs like that". I haven't really looked into those…

In this short snippet, Vivian recounts the TikTok video on her feed of a woman sharing her experience getting accepted into this flexmed program at the Icahn School of Medicine. This video caught Vivian's interest and prompted her to search for it on Google. This video sparked subsequent research Vivian conducted on early acceptance into medical school type programs. This triggered Vivian's interest in BS/MD programs, as I described in the beginning vignette. Andrés also shares this cyclical process of seeing targeted social media content and

advertisements as he was in the midst of his college research. In a group plática after submitting his college applications, he reflects on this experience in his college search process, stating, "It was like I was searching things, ads would pop up, and then I would get influencers, showing me all these different things about the colleges." Andrés observed the bidirectional flow of information he was receiving triggered by his Google searches and the content he was engaging with on social media. The targeted advertisements and content Andrés makes note of is something several collaborators caught on to, and I discuss further in Chapter 3.

For Sally, early in her college search process, seeing high school students post about their experiences was informative to her. She says,

> So right now is like, a very, good time to be on social media, specifically TikTok, because, you know, admission decisions. Like they've been, what, like, all this month. So, I've been hearing and seeing so much on TikTok from, schools and like, people being accepted, people being rejected, and it's like, also what!? I'm kinda glad that I'm getting to see this, but also a little bit scared for next year. But, yeah, I've, seen a lot from like TikTok… everyone's like else's college journey… Like, their application process and everything and their admission process, everything.

Sally appreciated seeing current high school seniors post about their college acceptances and rejections. As a first-generation college student, it gave her perspective on what to expect her senior year. Through social media, Sally and other collaborators are able to see a glimpse of the college application process and college life from students' point of view. As I discussed above, students' college searches were informed, among many things, by a desire to get a real and unfiltered perspective about college life, and hence why they turned to social media and content

from students specifically. The information students were able to gather from social media such as TikTok informed their college search process and, as I discuss in Chapter 3, their college decisions.

For Sage, she found college information– including information about her interests and hobbies– on Google and Reddit. "Like, sometimes Reddit has good stuff, you know, on there… Sometimes I ask questions on there to get some information and, sometimes, the community is helpful. Sometimes they're rude, but you know, I still get information out of it." When I first met Sage, she wanted to pursue a computer science or video game programming major. Her interest in video games was connected to her siblings and the nostalgia of playing Nintendo with her father. "I just love Nintendo, like my siblings play video games a lot growing up, and I would always watch them…My dad got me into like, Nintendo. So that's like, he's one of the main reasons why," Sage shares. Several of the advertisements she received early on were for programming and computer science programs, specifically for online programs charging a fee. After participating in a rigorous summer research program at a University of California campus like Sally and Amíra, having conversations with her art teacher, and reflecting on her love for art, she decided to apply to interior design programs in the fall. In Chapter 3, I discuss how Reddit and YouTube, as social network forums and a social media sites informed her decision to attend a California State University Campus to pursue interior design.

Digital Media Literacy

Despite the literature on search bias and misinformation (Haider & Sundin, 2019; Lin et al., 2023), students shared approaches to decipher credible information. While not foolproof, these approaches speak to students' skepticism about some of the content they were receiving

and engaging with and not accepting all the information at face value. Three approaches students use include searching for college information on trusted websites like those ending with ".org" or university websites, cross-referencing information against other websites and sources, and reading comments and reviews from other users on social media. When asking María to walk me through her process of searching for college information, she shared how she identifies information as more reliable.

María:	I think I'll go to Google, and I will search" top colleges for law" or I would put "the best colleges in California."
Patricia:	And then, you know, it's called, like the search, the search engine results, right? So when you search something and then a bunch of like a list of things come out? How would you know, like, what to look through? Or what catches your attention?
María:	I would think I would just look through all of it. Or I'll make sure that says .org and not .com
Patricia:	And why would you do that?
María:	Because my one of my teachers told me that if it says .org or something that's more formal than .com it's probably more reliable.

For María, perusing all the information she could online was key for her due to her feeling confused and intimidated by the college application process. Yet, checking to make sure a web page had the ".org" in the domain helped her identify information she deemed "more reliable." Ximena also shares a similar sentiment to María about searching for websites that appear to be more credible. When asked how she determines the information she reads is credible, she says the following:

> I mean, at school, they usually tell you, you know, if it's dot… there's some [websites] that are more credible than other ones. So I kind of just look at that and, because

> obviously, if it's like a program, or, the website of the school, I feel like it's just more, that's gonna be like, they're not gonna be lying on their own website. So I guess, sometimes I'll try to look specifically for that. So I'm like, okay, yeah, that this is true. Yeah, sometimes it's a little harder when it's just oh, an article or something.

Ximena trusts the information she receives directly from the school website. This is similar to what Amíra, Yatziri, and Sally shared about looking through college websites to gather information about schools. Collaborators, therefore, found the statistics and information directly from college websites to be reliable and trustworthy. Other tools collaborators used to sift through college information included cross-referencing information against other websites. For example, in the same plática, Ximena mentions looking at one or more websites to get a different perspective.

> You know, I try to look for it [answer to the question] because sometimes I feel with some websites don't give you a clear answer, or like they're kind of confusing. So, I'll look for one that's like, you know, more clear, I'll read through it. I usually getting second like websites, you know, look at options.

Similar to Ximena, Amíra and Yatziri also shared this practice of cross-referencing information across websites. When asking Amíra about her process of searching for college information, she shares she compares the information she is getting across websites. "I'd kind of compare the websites, if it's similar to what they're saying, then that's where also, kind of accepting the information like, oh, must be kind of true." Below, I ask if she could clarify why she compares websites.

Patricia: Just to clarify, when you say that, you compare.. what I heard you say is you compare websites, and so it seemed like what you're saying is that if you're looking at one website and it says something and then another website says something similar, is that a way for you to tell it's, you know, "This is accurate," "This is credible." Is that what you?

Amíra: Yeah. If it's a sketchy website, then no. But if it's kind of, I'm getting the same information, like over and over, and it's like, a similar list than if that keeps popping up. And I feel, okay, maybe there's I don't know, I would take it in as like, there's a reason why keeps popping up, because not just random information thrown at me. But, yeah, I would kind of compare them, I wouldn't just go off the first thing that I see, I think I would go from, website to website. And then if it's similar information, then yeah, I feel I would find it credible.

Similar to Amíra and Ximena, Yatziri looks across websites for college information and ultimately confirms the information on the school website.

> I do look at those [other] websites but to get confirmation, I look at the, original, directly from the school. Yeah I'll click on those websites where they give like brief information about it. I'm like, "Okay, this seems nice" And I would just search up the actual school and look for it and see if it's there and stuff.

Collaborators searching for college information across websites and corroborating that information on the school website is a tool they enacted in their college search process. Cross-verifying information and evaluating credible sites through their domain or institutional affiliation is important to highlight and nuances the scholarship in digital literacy studies. While most of the information they receive from digital technologies likely lacks credibility, this finding speaks to collaborators enacting critical thinking skills despite being bombarded with information. Another tactic collaborators shared was reading through comments and reviews on social media sites to judge the credibility of information. Two collaborators in particular, Andrés

and Sage, talked about reading through comments of some of the online content and advertisements they saw on social media.

In the first recorded plática with Andrés in March of 2023, he shares the following in response to my question, asking him to walk me through his search process for college information.

> So I usually just be scrolling on TikTok. And I just get a random ad. And sometimes they just seem too good to be true. Like, there's a couple that actually screen recorded. So I'll send them. That are, "Study abroad for like this". Or "Get your abroad paid for" or whatever. And so I'll click the link, and it'll take me to, Safari, or Google or whatever. And then from there, I read what I have to, and I'm okay, this is kind of sketchy. Like, let me actually look into it. And so then I ask, oh, maybe like people's, not reviews, but like, what they think on it, or what they actually, if they've done it, if people have done it or anything, just kind of see, stuff like that. So, let's say, there's just another ad for this university that I've never heard about, okay, let me go check what type of programs they have, let's say like "Programs at blank" right and then I'll look into it.

In his response, he shares a little bit about receiving an advertisement while he is on social media, TikTok, specifically, and his process for seeing if the information he receives from this advertisement adds up to what other people are commenting about their experience. Additionally, he goes on to discuss how he looks at the programs offered at institutions he is receives advertisements for that he has yet to hear of to determine whether it would be a school he would be interested in. During the first recorded plática with all collaborators, Andrés was the only one who mentioned advertisements in his college search process. Other collaborators talked

about the influx of email and mail advertisements they had received but did not discuss further how, if at all, they used information from advertisements to inform their college research. In Chapter 3, I discuss collaborators' perceptions of advertisements and how they made sense of them.

As mentioned earlier, Sage was keen to use Reddit as a source of information for many of her interests, including engaging and learning more about the Japanese and video game community. "Sometimes I look at the video game community and a ton…there's like a lot of communities and I just looked through it. And I remember during the pandemic, I would just scroll for hours and not realize hours have passed." As she decided to reconsider her major and pursue interior design at a California State University campus, she reflected on how she used Reddit in her college search process.

> …Reddit is very, personal to people's stories. So I always, look at, like, those kinds of posts and see, what it's like, so that's, kind of the reason why I'm so influenced to join interior design so much, other people's, like, personal experiences. I like hearing about different ones. Because I know every experience is different, you know? So, I'm kind of, I'm just, looking at these stories. And I'm like, okay, this is pretty interesting. And ads alone, kind of, don't do it for me, I would say.

For Sage, the personal stories shared online by the Reddit community about their experiences in interior design piqued her interest and motivated her to pursue that major. While she acknowledges that everyone's experience is different, she wanted to get different perspectives to cross-reference and confirm her decision to pursue a career in interior design.

This personalized touch is something collaborators shared with me later on in their college application process and decisions, which I discuss in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

Students are not making choices in a vacuum; they are bombarded with college information in their digital *nepantla* online search space. Still, they make decisions in how they structure their search and apply different approaches informed by support from institutional agents. The ways they conduct their college search inform the information they receive and subsequent advertisements, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Equally important, students enact different digital media literacy approaches in verifying the information they receive online.

CHAPTER 3: DECODING DIGITAL ADS: HOW HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS MAKE SENSE OF ONLINE COLLEGE ADVERTISING

I sat across from Sally on her living room couch, my right leg bent as I positioned my body to face her. She stared back at me, her hair still wet, from the shower, clipped in a half-up-do. Her mom is in the dining room sitting down and eating dinner as she tells me about their New Year's Eve plans. A boy and girl come running down the hallway, and she asks them to say hello to me. She says, "*Son mis nietos. Hijos de mi hijo que vive en Oxnard. Los dejó aquí y se llevó al bebé con él. Vamos a Oxnard a dejarlos y celebrar la Nochevieja con ellos.*" [They are my grandchildren, kids of my son who lives in Oxnard. He left them here and took the baby with him. We will drop them off in Oxnard and celebrate New Year's Eve with them.] After catching up with Sally's mom, I asked Sally how she was doing. She shared that she was stressed because she had not received her term grades and was afraid she would not get them in time for the Stanford application deadline. She told me she wanted to email her teachers to inquire about her grades. I recommended that she reach out to her teachers after the New Year's holiday, and then I asked her if she was applying to other private schools. She said she had changed her mind about the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), and I asked why. She told me she had seen several TikTok videos about how miserable students at Caltech were. "Even the website says students are sleep-deprived. I don't want to go there and be miserable too. That is why I am not applying anymore."

This plática with Sally on December 27, 2023, speaks to the significant role of digital technologies, specifically digital advertisements and content, on students' college choice

processes. Like Sally, Vivian and María also disclosed they were no longer applying to or considering certain schools because of disconcerting videos they had seen on TikTok as I discuss in the findings below.

These pláticas with Sally, Vivian, and María occurred at the latter stage of their application process. The content they were receiving online informed their thoughts about whether to apply or consider enrolling in an institution. Indeed, the digital advertisements and content collaborators received and engaged with informed every stage of their college decision-making process— from search to applications to decisions. Researchers find students' preference for sources of college information and decision-making activities evolved over the course of the year as students relied more on communication with colleges and universities in their college choice process (Galotti & Mark, 1994). The decision-making process of students, while critical, has largely been overlooked in the college choice literature. Furthermore, I contribute to a glaring hole in the college choice literature that does not critically examine the role of digital technologies and platforms in students' college decision making processes. Additionally, this chapter makes a novel contribution to the scholarship in enrollment management that has largely ignored how marketing and recruiting impact students' college choices. Findings from this chapter focus on how collaborators make sense of digital advertisements in their college search and application processes.

Literature on Higher Education Enrollment Management

Scholarship on enrollment management in higher education frames postsecondary institutions as key players in affecting college access; deliberate decisions made by institutions regarding the types of students they want and how they recruit them (Salazar et al., 2021;

Stevens, 2007). While this is true, I argue that marketing and recruiting efforts are also a college choice issue– marketing strategies influence students' college choice processes and ultimately their perceptions of college opportunity. As I discussed in Chapter 2, students engage in different practices in their college search process to search for college information. The devices they use, what they do on those devices, and their online behaviors set off an avalanche of information across platforms, which in turn informs the content they engage with and their subsequent online behaviors, thereby creating a feedback loop of college knowledge. During their college search and application process, students interact with institutions directly through college visits, admissions recruiting visits, email correspondence with admissions personnel, and indirectly through digital technologies and platforms through results from Google searches, school websites, and email and social media advertisements. These points of contact, as I discussed in Chapter 2, impact the college information students have access to and as I find in this chapter, how students make sense of that information in their college search process.

College choice models and frameworks make reference to the role of communication with institutions as an important factor in students' college choice-making process (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Chapman (1981) foregrounds the role of college administrators and enrollment managers in setting recruitment priorities to attract prospective students. The literature on enrollment management in higher education discusses approaches to identify prospective students and convert them to enrolled students– capitalizing on the "students as consumers" ideology (Campbell, 2017; Salazar et al., 2021; Slaughter et al., 2004, p. 478). The enrollment funnel is divided into stages– leads/prospects, inquiries, applicants, admits, and enrolled students– with strategies at each stage to lead students down the recruitment funnel

(Campbell, 2017; Salazar et al., 2021). Scholarship on enrollment management and recruiting has documented some ways colleges and universities employ marketing and recruiting interventions to identify and recruit students.

Previous scholarship on marketing practices in college admissions has focused on for-profit institutions notorious for their pervasive tactics to recruit students, particularly the most vulnerable student populations, including Black women, military veterans, and low-income communities (Baird et al., 2022; Cellini & Chaudhary, 2020; Cottom, 2017; Dache-Gerbino, 2018). Through an ethnography of the for-profit enrollment management industry, Cottom (2017) argues that for-profits thrived because of the conditions that led to the new economy–constrained choices, a declining labor market, and targeted marketing. For-profit institutions successfully recruit because they spend considerable resources on recruiting students that "traditional" colleges and universities often ignore (Cottom, 2017).

On the other hand, scholarship on recruiting by not-for-profit institutions identifies traditional approaches to connecting with students, such as admissions recruiting visits. One traditional method of recruiting includes travel visits by admissions counselors to high schools and events across the country. In his ethnography of a selective private liberal arts college, Stevens (2007) finds that these travel visits perpetuate the social reproduction of class by maintaining long-standing relationships with affluent high schools to promote the steady flow of affluent students who can afford tuition at "The College." Gunther and Benson's (2021) study with admissions officers at selective colleges and universities found that admissions officer's decisions are informed by the institution's philosophy and priorities (e.g., diversity mission and campus demographics). For example, similar to Stevens (2007), they find admissions counselors

at selective colleges with lower socioeconomic diversity favored high schools where they had long-standing relationships, the "bread and butter schools," schools where students can afford to pay tuition at selective institutions (Gunther & Benson, 2021, p. 42). Thus, both studies speak to the self-reinforcing reproduction of class and privilege through recruitment strategies.

Salazar et al. (2021) study on the off-campus recruiting visits by public research universities finds that institutions privilege affluent, private, and out-of-state schools serving predominantly White students, largely ignoring Black, Latinx, and Native American students living in low-income neighborhoods. Off-campus recruiting visits are used to identify prospective students at the beginning stage of the recruitment funnel and convert prospects to inquiries and applicants (EAB, 2018). Moreover, off-campus recruiting visits are one approach to identifying prospective students.

Whereby digital advertising is concerned, institutions systematically identify prospective students by purchasing student lists from ACT and College Board (Belkin, 2019; Salazar et al., 2022), and once leads are identified, digital marketing efforts are enacted to funnel students down the recruitment funnel (EAB, 2018). Salazar et al. (2022) argue that while student list products can be used to increase college access (Howell et al., 2021; J. Smith et al., 2022), the underlying databases exclude non-test-takers, and search filters enable universities to both target and exclude prospects through geographical variables as proxies for race and income, thereby perpetuating socioeconomic and racial inequities. The aforementioned literature speaks to problems in the recruitment funnel due to the widespread exclusion in strategies used to identify "leads" or prospects– off-campus recruiting visits and student lists– that maintain and reinforce the social reproduction of race and class privilege (Salazar et al., 2021, 2022; Stevens, 2007). As

the information on prospective students is purchased, marketing strategies, including digital marketing efforts, are employed to convert students into inquiries and applicants (EAB, 2018).

Digital Marketing and Recruiting in Higher Education

The rise in competition in a global market gave precedence to marketing strategies and the adoption of business theories and concepts in higher education to effectively market and recruit prospective students (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Regarding marketing communications, Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka (2006) found a mismatch in the effective communication of information prospective students were seeking and the information provided by traditional forms of print communication. This early scholarship on marketing communications, relationship marketing (Gibbs, 2002), and the introduction of the "Internet evolution" or Web 2.0 were the precursors to researchers studying social media marketing in higher education recruiting and advertising (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011, p. 10). This scholarship in higher education marketing has adopted strategic marketing approaches from businesses, including market segmentation, to streamline and maximize marketing resources (Rindfleish, 2003). Market segmentation refers to the process of identifying and grouping segments of consumers based on key variables such as geographic, demographic, behavioral, and psychological attributes with the premise that those grouped together will share similar values and preferences (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Prastyabudi et al., 2024). From a higher education supply-side perspective, market segmentation is critical to enrollment management and recruitment efforts in understanding rational and emotional factors relevant to students' college choice decisions and subsequent targeted marketing strategies to recruit them (Angulo et al., 2010).

For example, Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) created a market segmentation of students in their study using cluster and factor analysis, illustrating how students' social media behaviors in their college research are essential data for marketing strategies. Constantinides & Zinck Stagno (2011) home in on behavioral-based marketing approaches, saying, "Recruitment officers should actively and continuously engage with social media in their promotional mix, understand the online behavior of potential students, and accept that the customer is a powerful partner in the social relationship." (p. 21). Since this early scholarship in social media marketing, researchers have since studied the use of different social media platforms to market and recruit prospective students, including Facebook (Peruta & Shields, 2017, 2018), Twitter (Marie Condie et al., 2018; Palmer, 2014; Veletsianos et al., 2017), and Instagram (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2022; Reyes, 2023). Given the prominence of Facebook and its early entry into the social media landscape, several studies focused on the use of Facebook in engaging prospective college students, finding that photos and posts featuring sporting events and campus news were popular among students (Peruta & Shields, 2017, 2018).

Beyond engaging prospective students, Shields and Peruta (2019) found students preferred information-seeking activities like visiting official .edu websites, touring campuses, and speaking to current students and staff over visiting a school's social media pages in determining which school to attend. Qualitative interviews with students, however, suggest students prioritize school official .edu websites in helping them identify fact-based information about a college in their college search process, and use social media once they have established interest in a school to help determine where to enroll (Shields & Peruta, 2019). These findings are consistent with my findings in Chapter 2; collaborators also share they use official college

websites to identify statistics and information about a school in their college search process. As I discuss below, collaborators use social media to make sense of the information they receive online and decide which schools to apply to and enroll in.

The scholarship on social media marketing in higher education largely focuses on organic or 'unpaid' social media marketing approaches (e.g., university-affiliated social media pages run by university personnel) (Shields & Peruta, 2019). While the benefit of unpaid social media marketing is the cost efficiency, a limitation of organic unpaid marketing is that the audience reach is capped at the number of followers. Platform-specific restrictions make it challenging to grow engagement organically and, as such, promote a pay-to-play approach where institutions adopt paid advertising tactics to increase their visibility (Peruta & Shields, 2018; Shields & Peruta, 2019). By contrast, the nascent scholarship on paid digital marketing in higher education examines advertising spend for search engine optimization Taylor & Bicak (2020) and demographic targeting of traditional and display advertisements by institutional sector (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2023). While this growing scholarship is critical to our understanding of college advertising spend by institutional sector, it is unclear how advertising spend and, as a result, the type and quantity of advertisements students receive, impact their college choices.

Germane, to this study, is understanding how these digital technologies, as intermediaries of postsecondary institutions, function as a structure in determining what type of access to college information students receive. For example, a recent audit study by information and computer scientists ran paired ads of for-profit and public colleges and found racial discrimination in the delivery of education advertisements on Meta (Imana et al., 2024). Their findings suggest that Meta's platform perpetuates historical and implicit bias in

disproportionately delivering advertisements of for-profit institutions– both neutral advertisements and advertisements depicting Black students–to Black users (Imana et al., 2024). Imana et al. (2024) conclude with important considerations for platform bias; they state,

> The racial difference we observe in the delivery is not due to the advertiser's targeting choices since we select racially balanced audiences. It is also not due to market effects or difference in platform use by race since our methodology controls for those. Therefore, even if for-profit institutions aim for racially balanced ad targeting, Meta's algorithms would recreate historical racial skew in who the ad are shown to and would do so unbeknownst to the advertisers. Our findings show it is not enough for schools to target their ads equitably; platforms also need to ensure their ad delivery algorithms are not biased by race. (p. 9)

The implications of Imana et al.'s (2024) study shed light on multiple levels of discrimination in higher education marketing, from enrollment management to platform bias. As higher education institutions outsource to external organizations in partaking in marketing and advertising efforts (Slaughter et al., 2004), the level of control institutions, even those making their best effort to reduce bias, diminishes as control is left in the hands of a platform's algorithm. As such, scholarship in higher education enrollment management and college choice need to embed an analysis from a critical digital media perspective. Understanding the role of not only institutions but digital technologies is critical to higher education access and students' choices.

This study examines the role of digital ads and platforms on students' college choice processes— from the search to the application phase. Informed by a college-*conocimiento*

framework of college choice, this chapter builds off of findings from my Chapter 2 and is informed by scholarship in critical digital studies. Students are heavily online, and the information they engage with informs their perceptions and, at times, their decisions about college. I argue that the digital advertisements students receive inform their perceptions of college and college opportunities. Most qualitative studies of college choice center students' experience in understanding different factors that impact their college choices. This scholarship, however, largely ignores the role of digital technologies and platforms in students' college decisions. By contrast, most studies of higher education marketing and recruiting focus on supply-side priorities in improving digital marketing efforts (paid and unpaid) from a students-as-customers point-of-view– not seriously considering students' college choice processes. This study shows that the digital advertisements and content students engage with can be critical in informing their perceptions about college and their college choice processes– like the examples from Sally, Vivian, and María in deciding not to apply and enroll in particular institutions.

Towards a digital *nepantla* of college-*conocimiento*

Given what we know from the scholarship in enrollment management and scholarship from critical digital studies, understanding how students are receiving advertisements and make sense of them is important to study because it can be consequential for students' college choices and college opportunities. I situate college-*conocimiento* and scholarship on advertising and the social distribution of attention to examine how students make sense of digital college advertisements in their college choice process (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). This study explores the role of digital advertising in students' college application processes that can structure college opportunities. Findings from Chapter 2 show that students are utilizing digital devices, Google

search, and social media to inform their search and other aspects of their college choice process, including applying and making choices about college. The information they get can cloud their perspective and enact social engineering, as we've seen by scholarship in search engine bias (Noble, 2018). This has broader implications for students who do not have support from institutional agents and family and are relying on the information they are receiving from these platforms that are concerned with making money. Moreover, the findings from this chapter illuminate how students navigate a digital *nepantla*—an in-between space shaped by their interaction with digital technologies—ultimately influencing their decision-making processes. As students engage with these technologies, they follow an iterative cycle of information gathering, driven by the digital traces that continuously populate their screens, thereby creating feedback loops that shape their college knowledge.

Findings

Findings from this chapter shed light on how students make sense of digital advertising in their college application process. These findings build off of findings in Chapter 2 in speaking to how students use digital devices and platforms and gather information in their college search process. In this chapter, students speak at length about the advertisements they engaged within their college application process that informed their ideas of college and their college decisions. The first finding reveals how students experience a feedback loop of digital college information—an iterative process where college searches trigger advertisements and social media content, which in turn influence subsequent searches. This finding provides important context for understanding the cyclical nature of the digital college information students encounter. Findings are then broken down by the information overload of email advertisements

students received and their feelings of overwhelm, how students make sense of these advertisements, how this sense-making process informs their college decision-making, the role of social media, different from paid advertisements on their college, and lastly student recommendations for better engagement.

Feedback loops: college search and advertisements

College application season was demarcated by rampant emails from colleges and universities. Collaborators noticed a shift in the communications they received from postsecondary institutions during the summer and fall of their senior year. This was also a period where collaborators began to earnestly search for college information and work on their college essays as application deadlines drew near. Collaborators reflected on this period of searching for college information and decisions about college applications during a group plática in mid-January 2024. I conducted this group plática with Yatziri, María, Amíra, Vivian, and Andrés. Sage and Sally had a scheduling conflict last minute and could not make it, and Ximena opted out of the group plática. During this time, most college application deadlines had passed for CSUs and UCs, and three collaborators Vivian, María, and Sally had deadlines fast approaching for some private schools. I began the plática by asking collaborators if anyone wanted to share their overall college application process. Yatziri goes first and shares how applying to college at first was overwhelming, "Like starting the application, there is a lot of steps that were required a lot of information that I had to provide. And I didn't anticipate it to be that much. So it was kind of overwhelming for me at first." However, after she started working on her applications, the process got easier. Amíra chimes in and agrees with Yatziri; applying for college was

overwhelming for her too, but having older sisters who had both gone through the process provided her some guidance and support. She shares,

> And so they [sisters] kind of told me what direction I should go into and but it was also on my own because their… their majors are different than mine. So in terms of that, I would just kind of have to… I didn't go blindly like I would Google search or I would ask questions to either Ms. [Rendon] or even to you [, Patricia].

Amíra shares that despite having her sisters to help her in the process and institutional agents like me and Ms. Rendon, she also used Google search to answer her questions. As I discussed in Chapter 2, collaborators used Google search to gather information about college, particularly when obtaining information from Ms. Rendon, me, or other protective agents was not feasible or readily available. Online searches informed some of the college knowledge students received as I discussed, was the case for Amíra with Google's Featured Snippet and María with Google and YouTube. Following Amíra comments, Andrés, María, and Vivian share a little bit about their individual experiences applying to college. I begin probing more about students' experiences specifically with digital advertisements and technologies in their college search and application process. I opened it up to the group and asked, "Can you share a little bit more about your experiences with digital advertisements in your college search and application process? Does anyone want to begin?" Vivian raises her hand on Zoom and shares what that experience with digital advertisements was like for her. In the conversation below, she explains.

> Vivian: I remember when I researched more schools with a neuroscience major because there's not many that I knew of, at least. After I did that, I did start getting, videos about schools that have them. So that helped me find other schools. And that's kind of what prompted me to, even apply to schools out of state, because just in California, there isn't that many that

have the neuroscience program that I want to take. So that that helps after I researched neuroscience programs, saw all those ads, and being exposed to those schools that I didn't really know of, to help me apply under a major that I want to pursue.

Patricia: So when you say that as, when you started researching those specific majors, you started getting more content from different schools. What did… What do you mean by when you started researching, and where are you..? Like, were you doing research on Google? Were you looking at TikTok, or Instagram? What were you using to look at those specific programs?

Vivian: I use both Google and TikTok. First, I use Google to search for schools that have a neuroscience program. Because there's some schools that at first glance, can be, yeah, they have a neuroscience program, but then you look into it, and it's only a minor. So that's how you filter out those that offer it as a major. And then after that, I would use TikTok kind of similar to [María], and I would TikTok like how their students describe their student experience at the school. Or even if I could find someone that is a neuroscience major at that school, like kind of see, how they talk about it. And besides that, ads and the TikTok videos I would get from the school. After seeing those videos, I'd be, "okay, yeah, I can see myself there," or, "yeah, I'd like to go there."

Patricia: So…another follow-up. So, when you received content about these schools on TikTok, could you distinguish between, were these ads? Or was it? You know, "Hey, I'm a student at UCLA, and, I'm gonna tell you about my experience" like, was it content created by, content creators? Was it? Like, how can you distinguish what type of information or was it a mix of more things?

Vivian: It was like a mix of both. Because first, after I searched for, schools with neuroscience, I got those TikTok videos, or there's Instagram, I even got Instagram posts too about those schools. And then after I would go on TikTok and look for students under that major, or in that school, that's when I would get more like "This is my life at Reed" or "This is my life at Brown," like stuff like that.

Vivian begins by sharing that her research on neuroscience programs led her to identify other schools and made her consider schools out of state. For Vivian, the feedback loop of information, that is, the research she did for schools with a neuroscience major and subsequent information she was receiving, was helpful to her in her college search and application process. I ask follow-up questions about what she means by doing research, and she explains she goes on

Google to get more information on these programs and, as I discuss later, uses TikTok to search for student experiences in these programs. Curious about her perception of these videos, I ask her if she could distinguish if they were advertisements or social media content. She shares it was both. First, she searched for information and noticed receiving TikTok videos about these programs and even "Instagram posts" and later would go on TikTok to search for videos of students and come across "This is my life at Brown" type videos posted by students. As I find in Chapter 2, collaborators use Google to gather information about college. Vivian began to narrow her searches as she realized many programs that advertised their neuroscience programs really offered minors. Furthermore, once she identified the programs she was interested in, she went on TikTok to "TikTok like how their students describe their student experience." As I discuss below, some students readily used social media, TikTok specifically, to gather college knowledge. All of this together, the Google results, social media advertisements, and TikTok videos from students informed her *nepantla* space of college research, el compromiso in college planning, and ultimately coyolxauhqui in her college choices (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Andrés shares a similar process of using Google to search for engineering programs, receiving advertisements on social media, and content from "influencers" on TikTok. He says,

> So for ads, I mean, I feel like the ads were, they were coming in as I was searching for things, right. So I was searching like, what I mean, I feel my school focused, what system I wanted to go to was UC. And so I was searching up "What UC has the best engineering program?", "What UC has this or what UC has that," right? And so I feel that's when the ads will start rolling in and being like, Okay, "Well, there's these schools for engineering", "There's this for engineering", right. And, later in time, it will start, like

> social media will start recommending me college advisors on Instagram. So, it'd be like a dude, or something being like, "Well, this is what these people got on their SATs, and let's compare them to yours, your stats", and I'd be like, "okay, like, this is a lot." But I feel I was getting that a lot of, Instagram and TikToks being like, since you're searching college things, and you're going into that stage of your life, like this is all we're going to show you. And so I feel I was getting a lot of influencers being like, this is how this is like, college wise. So I feel it was a mix and like transition at the same time. It was like I was searching things, ads would pop up, and then I would get like influencers, showing me all these different things about the colleges.

While similar in terms of the process of using Google, Andres's search was system specific; he was set on applying and enrolling in a UC. Similar to Vivian, his search narrowed down to the discipline he was interested in, "the best engineering program." He explains that at some point he began receiving ads from college advisors comparing SAT statistics and feeling overwhelmed by this information. He makes an interesting point in how his Instagram and TikTok were filled with college-related content and advertisements and when speaking about these social media platforms says, "since you're searching college things, and you're going into that stage of your life, like this is all we're going to show you." Like Vivian, he shares that his online college research initiated the subsequent college-related content he received on social media, both for paid ads and content from influencers. In response to my question about the timeline of ads he received, he says the following:

> I mean, I started getting this information closer to when college apps were coming around, because I feel that's when I was searching up the most of being, okay, the time is

getting close. I just started researching this, as they're looking up any questions or doubts that I would have, and the ads will start popping up. And so I feel like around college app season, that's when I started getting a lot of your stuff.

His observations are supported by scholarship in the sociology of education and higher education literature that discuss how admissions offices organize travel visits around the college application season (Stevens, 2007) and how institutions increase their advertising spend during key college application months (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). Yatziri and Amíra also made the same observation, noticing an uptick in the ads they received during the summer before their senior year. I discuss this in the next section.

María, like Vivian, also used TikTok and Google in her college search. In the plática she explains that she felt applying to CSUs and UCs was easier because she received a lot of support from her school, but when it came to the common application, she had a hard time. "Because I didn't know which schools to apply to, and how to answer the questions correctly. I didn't really know the standards, like, how do you even answer those questions." María shares about the common application and supplemental materials needed from different private institutions. In our conversation below, I ask about how she went about looking for information in applying to private schools.

Patricia: And you? So you're saying that, you've received less support at your school to apply to, private schools and use a common application?

María: Yes.

Patricia: … How do you seek support or resources or figure out how to apply for those [private] schools?

María: So I go on TikTok to like Google questions I have. And also I use Google a lot.

Patricia: So what do you use TikTok and Google for, what are the differences?

María: So the questions they ask you [in the common app] like, "What's your favorite food?", "Who's your favorite movie?" I'm like, "How do I answer that without sounding like bad?" So I used to TikTok to see what other students answer to those that got accepted to school they want to, that I want to go to.

Patricia: And so then what do you use Google for?

María: I use Google to, like how to.. examples of the Common App essay. So I can see, what's a good format to use or to use it as inspiration.

In the same way Vivian and Andrés used Google and TikTok, so did María. María discusses the challenges of not knowing how to go about apply to private universities and navigating the common application. While I witnessed Ms. Rendon helping other students in EISP with their common app essays and putting on a short workshop on private school admissions, María and other collaborators continued to feel lost by the common application. For this reason, she turned to TikTok and Google to help her prepare her application materials. As collaborators are planning and preparing for college applications, they go back to digital *nepantla* and continue to do research to help them not only identify schools but like María, learn how to apply to them (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). María, like Vivian, used TikTok to help her in the college application process and learn from students in what worked for them. As I discuss below, social media platforms, specifically TikTok were important to students' college search and application processes. However, this was not entirely the case for Amíra and Yatziri, who relied less on social media in their college search and application process and shared that much of their college research was conducted at school using their school accounts and computers. Both felt that they received less personalized content on social media platforms because of this reason– less digital trace data on their college research.

From Andrés's and Vivian's perspective, their online college research triggered the college-related content they received across social media and digital channels. This finding speaks to how collaborators understand the cyclical process of advertising and online content in their college search and application process. These observations are critical to how collaborators continue to make sense of the advertisements and content they engage with in their college search and application process.

Information overload: "Bombarding my inbox entirely"

All collaborators echoed similar sentiments about being overwhelmed with the amount of email and social media advertisements they received. In the excerpt from our plática below, collaborators reflect on the influx of advertisements flooding their inboxes, the salience of private and out-of-school advertisements, and their observations and impressions of the advertisements they received. This group plática facilitated a space for collaborators to make sense of their experiences with advertisements in their college application process to build off of one another and offer individual nuances in their experiences. In the conversation below, Yatziri, Vivian, and Amira share more of their thoughts and experiences, particularly with the amount of emails they received from postsecondary institutions. They share,

Patricia: …Did anyone else have anything else they wanted to add or share about their experience? [Yatziri].

Yatziri: …Really, I got mainly a lot of emails from a bunch of schools, mainly out-of-state. And it wasn't, I got some during my junior year, but as soon as I entered into my senior year, that's when it just completely like filled my mailbox. And it was just ads and ads, like just emails and emails of just a bunch of different colleges. And um, kind of how [Amíra] said, I mainly did my research on my school account. And so, when I would search up like the best, nursing programs or certain programs, I would get like, they'll show some sponsored advertisements of like, different private

colleges and stuff. But on Instagram, I wouldn't really see that much advertisements of specific colleges. I'll see a bunch of like, content creators that will talk about their experiences and as well as on TikTok, but really what I mainly just saw on Instagram and Tiktok were just scholarships, but other than that, like my main… I saw like a lot of like college advert.. advertisements, I saw through email, yeah.

Patricia: Yeah, you definitely sent me a lot of email ads [both laugh] that you received. Did anyone else get a lot of emails? I know when I…I think I did get emails but when I was applying to college, it was less techie at the time, but I got so many brochures in the mail. Random ass schools I've never heard of emailing me. So I think [Vivian], you're first and then [Amíra].

Vivian: Um, so I also like [Yatziri] got a lot of emails from a bunch of different schools that I had never heard of. And it got, it's honestly been a little annoying because it's so many it's been bombarding my inbox entirely. But I've also gotten stuff in the mail. I got this like, I don't know if you remember me showing it to you [, Patricia]. But I got this massive like blue packet from Columbia, that I got a whole brochure from George Fox. And then I got a whole magazine from Dartmouth. It's been stuff like that. And it was like, oh and I got something from U Mich too but magazines, I'm talking like actual magazine from the schools. And I thought that was kind of crazy. Like they send them to my home.

Patricia: What did that feel, though, for you to get a brochure from Columbia, from George Fox, did that make you consider applying to the schools? Or what were your thoughts when you received that in the mail? Or just the emails?

Vivian: Um, when I received that stuff in the mail, my first thought, because I like, I'm kind of like a doubter in myself and was like, "This is crazy that they're spending so much ink on someone they're going to reject. That's crazy." But um, I mean, Columbia, I always wanted to apply to Columbia so that it didn't really affect it. And then George Fox well I did end up applying to that. It's like a nice school. For Dartmouth, they've sent me stuff like emails and stuff in the mail and I still didn't apply. So yeah. I guess it mostly came down to like after I researched the school, and I saw if it was a fit for me or not.

Patricia: Like with your interest in neuroscience, neurobiology, medicine?

Vivian: Yeah.

Patricia: Thank you, [Vivian].[Amíra].

Amíra: I, I agree with [Yatziri] and [Vivian], a lot of colleges, they would like bombard my email that my iCloud is now full. I have to go into my email

> and delete everything. Um, but it's mainly from, repeated colleges, a lot of like, Cal Lutheran…

Yatziri felt it important to bring up the fact that she received a lot of email advertisements to the point that they "filled" her inbox. All collaborators made remarks about the amount of emails they were receiving from schools during my time working with them, but Yatziri was the only one who consistently forwarded me emails she received. From June 2023 to February 2024, Yatziri forwarded over 1,500 emails. Andrés, Sally, and Ximena also forwarded some of their emails, but to a lesser extent. The amount of emails students received and their subsequent frustration with them resonate with industry research that finds students report feeling overstimulated by the information overload and end up avoiding emails altogether (EAB, 2020) like my collaborators. Vivian agrees with Yatziri, she too received so many emails from schools she was unfamiliar with to the point it became annoying for her and filled her inbox. Vivian shares the mail brochures she received from Columbia, George Fox, Dartmouth and the University of Michigan. She mentioned showing them to me, which I recall, and in early September wrote the following in my fieldnotes:

> As Vivian and I sit at the dining table and continue working on her PIQ statement, her mom comes home from work. She greets me, "*Hola Patricia, como estas?*" [Hi, Patricia, how are you?] I say hello to her and we exchange pleasantries. She makes a comment about how dusty she is from work and steps away, presumably to change. I continue to read through Vivian's PIQ draft and a few minutes later, her mom comes back to the dining room and sits down next to Vivian. We engage in small talk and she asks me how Vivian is doing. *Como le va?* [How is she doing?] I tell her she is doing good and we just

have to keep editing and working on her statements. She agrees and says its important she makes progress now because she will get busier with school. As we talk, she remembers something and tells me she will come back with *libros* [books] Vivian got in the mail. She brings back four college brochures and I thank her for sharing them with me and ask Vivian if I can take pictures of them. She lets me. There are four college brochures for Darmouth, Soka University, Columbia, and George Fox University. Vivian and her mom comment on how visually appealing the brochure for George Fox, a private Christian school, is. It is a roll fold brochure and Vivian expands it to display the nine images. In every image there is an iPhone silhouette and what appears to be screenshots of Instagram stories of college students in a slip-n-slide, attending the first college football game, dancing, going to the beach, drinking coffee, and other activities. Her mom tells me they did a good job with the promotion. Her mom steps away and Vivian tells me although it is far (in Oregon), her mom wants her to go there because it is a Christian school.

Months later, in this group plática, Vivian recounts receiving these brochures in the mail and expressing doubts she would get into saying, “This is crazy that they’re spending so much ink on like someone they’re going to reject.” However, she ended up applying to Columbia because she had always wanted to go, I discuss this later. George Fox on the other hand, was new to her, but after researching it some more and with her mom’s approval felt that it was a “nice school,” and so she applied. This was true for several collaborators who also mentioned to me on separate occasions, receiving brochures and letters in the mail. The continuous, unceasing emails, however, were something all collaborators agreed on.

In a separate plática with María a month after the group plática, I asked if she had received emails from colleges and universities during her college application process. She says,

> I did [receive emails], but I just put them in the junk because it was all these random colleges I didn't want to go to. I think I got emails from Rhode Island University. Like, I've never searched for colleges outside of my state. So it's kind of weird to me how I got Rhode Island, NYU, It didn't really make sense to me.

María was not interested in schools out of state, and receiving emails from them made her skeptical and made her question why these institutions were reaching out to her. She had expressed her frustration with the volume of emails she was receiving on a different occasion, and in this plática, her response was to move the emails from schools she was not interested in into her junk folder. Following her response about receiving emails from random out-of-state schools, below, I ask if she read emails from schools in California.

Patricia:	You said that you would just put them [emails] in the spam, the junk folder? Did you remember receiving emails? Or what about the emails from schools in California? Did you look into those?
María:	No, I didn't really get emails from the UCs until you apply to them. I never really got information about UC colleges or UCs.
Patricia:	You said until you applied. Did you then eventually get them? Or..
María:	Yeah, when I applied. I got emails about their programs about information about like their colleges. But before that, I never got emails.

María, like other collaborators, expressed the same observation; they did not receive, or at least perceived not receiving, emails from the UCs despite their interest in applying and enrolling in a UC. Curious about the timeline of UC email advertisements students received, I

asked Yatziri in a separate plática if she could recall for me when she began receiving emails from UCs. Below, I ask her about this.

> Patricia: …I'm wondering why. I guess what I'm trying to say is do you remember getting emails from UCs before you started your UC application or during? Or?
>
> Yatziri: Yeah, I would get some, but very few, like, really very few. And I feel throughout the application process, is when I started to get more of other UCs like, I'll get more of like UC Merced or like some of Davis or San Diego. But yeah, like when I was barely starting off, I'll hardly get some, like, I'll get some here and there, but like, they weren't as frequent as, like versus now. Like, I get a lot still.
>
> Patricia: You still get like, to this day from the UCs or in general?
>
> Yatziri: For other universities, that are not UCs, yeah I would still get some, but, some UCs like UC San Diego, I think it was during January, where they like, we're extending their application deadline. And so they'll send out a bunch of emails, constantly reminding like, "Oh, hey, UC San Diego has extended a deadline", like "Oh, you can still apply". And I think another university I think it was UC Merced is one, I think they extended their deadline, and they're just giving me emails of just constant reminders. Like "Oh we extended the deadline, you should still apply". You know, "there's some time like, you should still apply."

María, like Yatziri, commented on how they began to receive more, yet limited, emails from UCs during college application season and after submitting their applications. I asked María if receiving more emails from the UCs would have been helpful in learning more about different majors and programs at the UCs. She replies,

> It would because when I was applying to UCs, I kind of just [chose] history, economics [to major in], I didn't really do much research about it until after I applied. Like, after I applied, I finally found out that UC Berkeley was famous for their economics program. But I didn't know that before I applied.

This is critical to my collaborators, who all but one applied to a UC and had aspirations of attending a UC institution yet received minimal information during a precarious time in their college search process. María, as I discussed in the introduction, had virtually no support from her counselor and resorted to Google and social media for a lot of her college research. Confused by what she was seeing on Google and social media, María felt lost in the college application process and having to make decisions without complete information. Only after applying did she begin receiving emails from the UCs. Yatziri, like most collaborators, had expressed a strong desire to stay close to home, and her college choice set consisted of all California schools, but the majority of the advertisements she received were for private or out-of-state schools. María and Yatziri were not the only two who noted the absence of emails and advertisements from UCs and the abundance of emails from private institutions; other collaborators, as I discuss below, did as well.

Making sense of advertisements

Collaborators continued in their digital *nepantla* online search space for college information throughout their college application process. As I discussed above, despite their interest in UCs and CSUs, they were met with an overwhelming about of advertisements for private and out-of-state schools. In this section, I discuss how collaborators made sense of these advertisements for private and out-of-state schools and advertisements for programs that, at times, felt random and at times felt specific to their interests, but for programs they were not interested in.

Private and out-of-state schools

In late January, Andrés shared he was still receiving advertisements on social media from private institutions– two months after submitting his college applications. In the group plática, I asked collaborators if they considered any of the schools that were sending advertisements to them. Andrés goes first, and he says,

> So personally, um, I wasn't, really taking them as a choice too much. Because one, I wasn't getting too many college advertisements, I would get like, Chapman here in there, I would get Cornell, or Columbia or stuff, but there weren't really schools that I was looking into, per se. Um, I was getting more programs. So, studying abroad programs, I got so many of those. And I didn't even want to study abroad. I mean, not yet. And so I was like, whatever. But it was weird, because for the schools that I was actually taking into consideration. So like, CSUs or UCs or even some privates I wasn't specifically getting those. I never once I think that I get like a UC ad. Like, I don't even think I've ever seen one of those. And so I don't know, it was weird to, for me to look at these universities and be like. Okay, these are new, and I've never seen it before. And like maybe even look into them [schools] a little bit. And they'd be in Manhattan. And I'd be like, "I'm obviously not moving to Manhattan."

Andrés says he never received advertisements for UCs, a point he made on several occasions to me. For Andrés, attending a private school or even an out-of-state institution was an option but not something he seriously considered. He tells me his two older siblings had already attended a UC institution and paved the way for him. The way he put it was, "I'm open to looking into the CSU and UCs and privates and everything. But, I feel like the UCs are there.

You know, they've already been warmed up. Like I just have to [attend a UC], you know…?" Therefore, the advertisements Andrés was receiving for private or out-of-state institutions did not move the needle on his college choice decision. Amíra echoes similar statements about receiving ads for private institutions and finding comfort in the familiarity of applying to public four-year institutions in California like her two older sisters. Moreover, with the ubiquity of advertisements from private institutions, Amíra was dubious about them and did not feel like they were truly considering her. In our conversation below, she says,

Amíra: …I kind of just told myself, I don't know. Their emails. Like they're it's nice. Also the the mail they would send I know, I think I got a big envelope from Yale. And I was like, I don't know, I saw it. And I was, okay, but it just felt overwhelming. It didn't feel like I don't know, I didn't see it as they were considering me I saw just overwhelming just because of like, I've seen a lot of schools that have sent me stuff. So I don't know. That's just how I felt whenever I would open the emails or like open the actual mail.

Patricia: And why do you think you were a little hesitant or are hesitant to apply to private schools?

Amíra: Honestly, I think it's just that my sister's they didn't leave state they they didn't leave the state. I mean, yeah, I mean, they leave the state. And, I don't want to be… I don't know. I just don't see myself at a private school. And if I do I see myself like maybe older like, it might just be I don't I don't know, but it seems too serious. Like I know, it's college is serious, but it just seems seems like we're growing up. So it's kind of like that's what's making me hesitant.

Patricia: Yeah. Yeah,

Amíra: But also the demographic. I think that was the main thing that I was doing [Ms. Rendon]. It was demographic, like the different schools. Especially well, specifically because of [Summer research program]. The summer program. I could tell my [group of first-generation, low-income students] cohort like we all felt very out of place. And so I feel when it came to like us applying, I don't know, I had like an internal battle. I had an internal battle with, "Do I really want to go through, I don't know what we went through over the summer, for four years?" So that was one thing. That was the main thing. It was like I don't want to feel too out of my comfort zone going to college.

Patricia: Yeah, thank you for sharing. So um, you based on what you had already mentioned about [your summer program], are you speaking to the demographic and the students that were there? And that being similar to students at private institutions? Like maybe coming from communities that don't look like yours?

Amíra: Yeah, I would say so kind of most of the people that did go to [summer program] were like, very privileged, and had a lot of money. And, you know, that's not really, I guess, not their fault in a way. Like that's just kind of like their parents have money, or they inherent it. But it's just it felt really out of place.

Amíra, like Sally, as I discuss in Chapter 2, got exposure to college life during her summer program at a UC campus. The culture shock she experienced, similar to Sally's, clouded her perspective on college. Amíra felt comfortable applying to a California public four-year institution because, similar to Andrés, her sisters had paved the path for her. Even though she understands the academic rigor of college, having to experience what she experienced in her summer program for four years was not something she desired for her college experience. The ads Amíra received from private schools, coupled with her summer research program experience, forced her to grapple with the *coatilcue* and *el compromiso* spaces of college choice in anticipating college barriers connected to her summer experience (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Amíra came back from her summer program feeling a bit discouraged. In one plática, she shared she felt so behind in regards to the college application process compared to her peers who had numerous extracurricular activities to add to their college applications. During the last recorded plática with Amíra in early February, she shared that most of the advertisements she received on social media were from private schools, "I think honestly, all the digital advertisements have mainly been of private schools. Like I've never really seen public schools that have advertised to me." I asked her about the different platforms she received ads on, and she told me she received ads on

Instagram, Google search, and email. She adds, "…whenever I would search something college-related, there'll be an ad. And, the ad was usually not really a school. More like a link to information about like, colleges or something? "Or like, What's the best college?'" In discussing the email ads she received, she shared that they were primarily from private colleges as well. She says,

> But yeah, my email was mainly; honestly, I can say my email was mainly a bunch of private colleges as well. I don't know if it's because they have more funding and they are able to advertise more. But whenever I would get advertisements for example, UCs, it was because I had already applied to them. Or it was because I had created my UC application. It was because they had access to my email.

Amíra makes interesting connections to why she believes she received advertisements predominantly from private institutions. She surmises they have the budget to advertise more to students. This connection Amíra makes is similar to what researchers studying advertising find: that private institutions largely spend more on advertising compared to their public counterparts (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2020; Taylor & Bicak, 2020). Like Yatziri and María, Amíra also comes to the same conclusion– UCs did not advertise to her prior to application season and only once she had applied to them because, according to her, "they had access to my email."

For Yatziri, advertisements she received from private and out-of-state schools did not sway her decision to apply across California's tertiary higher education system. In response to Andrés sharing his perspective on the private school ads he received and feeling more comfortable applying to CSUs and UCs, Yatziri says the following to the group:

Yatziri: …And I really wasn't considering the private schools, I was unfamiliar of how that process would go to apply. And so my mind was already set, I'm just applying to CSU and UCs, since the beginning. And so I didn't really… those, it didn't really spark an interest in me, since I already knew what I wanted from the beginning. But I did look into some of them [private schools] that were like, in California, but still, it kind of did intimidate me, just private schools in general. And, when I think of just private schools, I think of oh, like, "you have to be rich to go there." It's like, oh, "it's like, it's more strict there." And I felt like in CSUs, and UCs like, I guess, in some way and have more liberty to do, however, and like most private schools are based on religion. And, I'm not really interested in going to a religious school.

Patricia: That's interesting. Thank you for sharing. So I'll kind of ask you the same question I asked [Andrés] so what do you think would have made you consider applying or looking into because you did mention that some you did look into [private schools] that were in California? What? What what do you think would have made you consider applying to a private school?

Yatziri: Um, probably if they had a really good nursing program. Because when I did my research on the schools that had the PI, the highest passing rates for the certified registered nurse license, a lot of them were CSU and UCs. And I hardly saw any private schools mentioned, but I did see when I was doing the research, like some benefits here and there, and also just like from TikTok, or just in general when I would search up, like, oh, like, "Are private schools, like something we like to consider for nursing students?" And I know there's a bunch of like, I think they have two here in [the SJV], like some private colleges here. But what I heard a lot was that most of them were like, if you were to apply, you'll be in debt a lot. And it's not much of financial support. And so I felt if they had that same support as like, UCs or CSU, maybe I want to consider it. But I was just mainly mostly familiar with CSU and UCs, because that's like, basically all I've heard my entire life, like UCLA, UC Irvine, CSU Bakersfield, all that. So I was I felt more comfortable. Just focusing on my research just on those colleges alone. So yeah.

Yatziri shares three deterrents to her considering private schools, the lack of navigational support in applying to private schools and her familiarity with CSUs and UCs, the associated costs of attending a private institution, and her associating private schools with religious affiliation. Receiving ads from private institutions propelled Yatziri to search for information on TikTok to get a better understanding of private schools offering good nursing programs in

California. From her research, she gathered that other public state institutions were better for nursing programs, and she did not have to consider applying to private schools. Yatziri also received information from other sources, including her sister's clients. In one plática, she shared that several of her sister's nail clients are in the medical profession and recommended she apply to local schools because they "have good programs here". As I discussed in Chapter 2, Yatziri was very conscious about financing college and applied to several local and national scholarships and was a semifinalist for a prestigious full-ride scholarship. She aimed to find a balance in finding good nursing programs while minimizing the debt she would incur since she knew that was not a burden she wanted or could put on her family and her sister as the financial provider of the household. The summer before senior year, Yatziri started working part-time at a fast food restaurant to save for college, knowing that she would have to forgo some of her extracurricular activities and running cross country to work. The videos she had seen on TikTok about applying to private schools for nursing programs confirmed her preconceived notions about the unaffordability of private schools. Furthermore, the information from knowable others, including her sister's clients, provided her with more information about local public schools with top-ranked nursing programs. I am not arguing whether the advice she received on TikTok is sound, but the point remains it informed her thoughts and ideas about private schools.

Talk about private school ads was top of mind for collaborators. On several occasions and in several informal and formal pláticas, this was something collaborators came back to. Despite the volume of ads students received from private institutions, several factors, including collaborators' skepticism of private institutions recruiting them, lack of support in navigating the

private admissions process, cost, and anticipated barriers, deterred most collaborators from applying.

Roulette of advertisements: Random, personalized, or both?

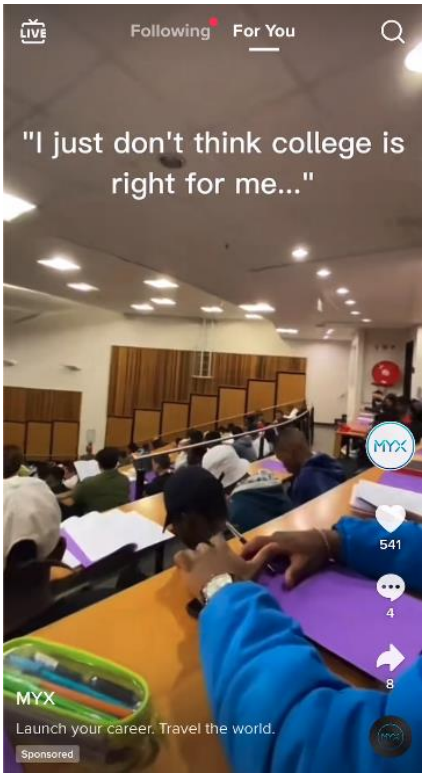
In sharing their observations about ads, students discussed receiving content that at times felt random and at times felt specific to the topic they were searching for but not exactly for the programs and schools they were interested in. For example, in pláticas with Andrés, he shares he received many advertisements for study abroad programs, "I mean, I feel like there was no specific area where they were coming from, they were very just scattered from all over the place. And so it was just like, 'Oh, study abroad here. Study abroad there,' but just the general common plate that they had was studying abroad." He goes on to share that the advertisements for study abroad programs were not connected to a specific school, "I feel it was just different programs that were provided by different schools. Yeah. And the thing is, I wouldn't even get ads for the school. Like, I would just get ads for the program." I ask him what his impressions of these ads were, to which he responds,

> I mean, it was cool, that different schools were like, "Here, you should try out this program". Because I feel I've never seen freshmen in college go study abroad somewhere, you know? And so it was the idea of "are they targeting the right audience?" Like, am I supposed to be receiving these emails? I mean, but also the programs were still there, you know, and this is cool to know that an option for studying abroad, you know, because I never really thought of, "I want to go study abroad or whatever." And so I feel sit really opened up like another gateway.

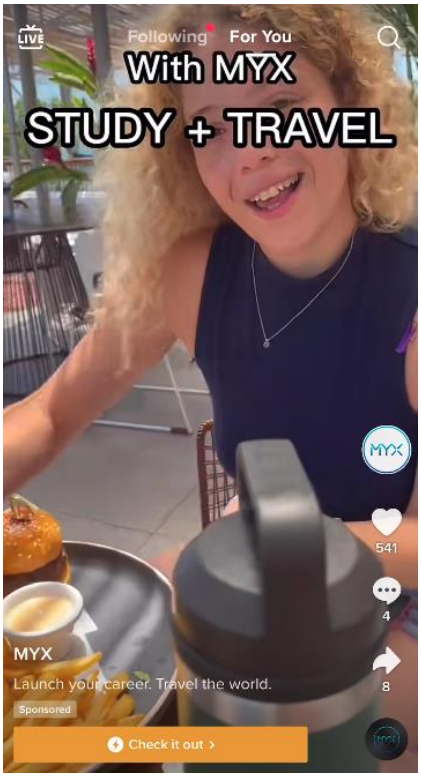
Andrés is referring to third-party study abroad programs like the one he received on TikTok from MYX, Go Overseas program on May 2, 2023 (see Figure 3.1). This short 15-second sponsored video begins with Kid Cudi's song, Pursuit of Happiness, and a quote, "I just don't think college is right for me…" with a backdrop to a lecture hall with students. The next few seconds contain clips from a plane, water, food, people sitting around on couches with the caption "With MYX Study + Travel," etc. Next, the caption reads, "Launch Your Career With less time and cost" and images of young people on the beach, surfing. The clip ends with a suggestion to click the button and "Check it out." Andrés's initial impression of these ads felt scattered and like these ads were not meant for him, saying "… are they targeting the right audience? Like, am I supposed to be receiving these emails?" This dissonance stemmed from his understanding that study abroad is something that students did later in college, not as an incoming college freshman. He also notes that these advertisements were not connected to a school, but rather a program, which made him a bit skeptical of them. Despite some of his skepticism of these programs, he mentions it gave him a new perspective on studying abroad. It is important to know that Andrés received several advertisements for third-party study abroad programs. He also shared advertisements from for-profit institutions, short-term certificate programs, and online programs. Sage, also received ads from third-party, online, and for-profit companies.

Figure 3.1

Screenshots of TikTok video for MYX study abroad program



A. (00:03)



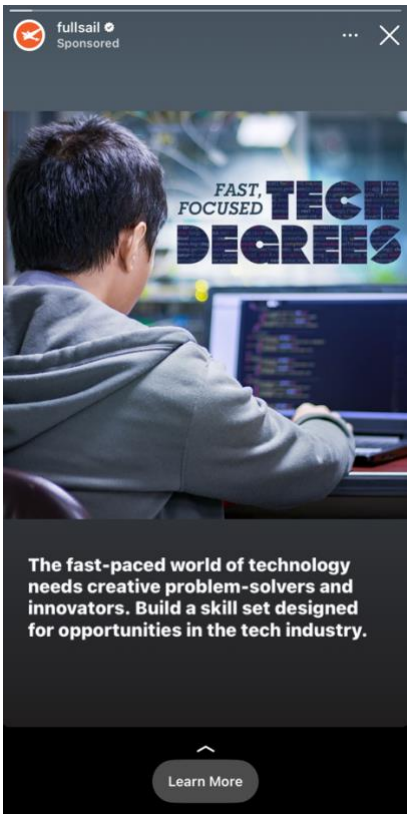
B. (00:07)

For Sage, most of the advertisements she received were for online programs promoting learning how to computer program and code, becoming a cybersecurity specialist, or healthcare professional in a short period of time. Most of these programs broadly fell into three buckets: online learning platforms offering individual or cluster courses for a fee, online short-term credential programs, or online bachelors and even masters degrees in various fields. While the content from some of the advertisements aligned with Sage's initial desire to major in computer science or video game programming, the ads she received came from online learning platforms, for-profit postsecondary institutions, or university extension or global campuses– all of which were of no interest to Sage. An advertisements Sage received from the for-profit institution, Full

Sail University, advertised “The fast-paced world of technology needs creative problem-solvers and innovators. Build a skill set designed for opportunities in the tech industry.” (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2

Screenshot of Instagram Story Advertisement from Full Sail University

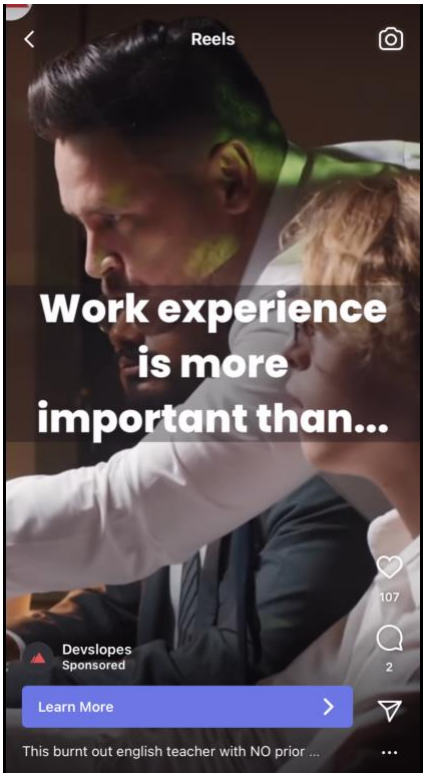


Another advertisement for Devslopes, a private company hosting an online learning platform includes the following language in their ad. “If you want to see the process Caleb and thousands of others have used to start a six figure career in coding in just 8 to 16 months and earn income while doing it? Click the link below.” This ad starts with a scenario where Caleb, a burnt out English teacher with no prior coding experience got a job at intuit in under a year. Well

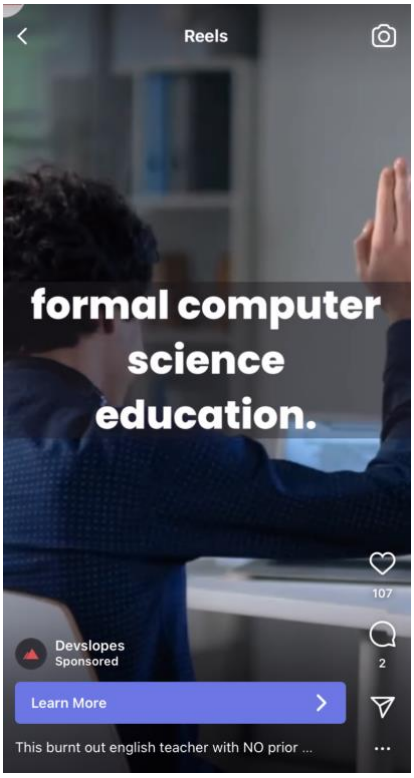
the secret, he learned to get freelancing work 12 weeks after starting. “He was earning while he was learning.” (see Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3

Screenshot of Instagram Reel Advertisement from Devslopes



A. (00:28)



B. (00:31)

Sage made notes of the advertisements she was receiving, telling me she found them interesting. In our first recorded plática in March of 2023, she told me, “I’ve been looking at a lot of computer science schools and you know what schools are good for video game programming. And I got a lot of ads for it.” In the months after that recorded plática, Sage continued to receive ads for these types of programs. After switching her intended major to interior design as I

discussed in Chapter 2, Sage commented how the ads she was receiving changed. For example, she tells me:

> I noticed, I guess throughout the changing of my major, right, it used to be a lot of video game stuff. And video games like design and computer science related stuff, but, the more I was, like, thinking about changing my major, the more things started changing, I guess, it kind of messy to a point, I'm like, "Oh, I'm not really interested in these things". But when I was looking to the interior design, and looking at a lot of photography, and a lot of creative majors and stuff like that, I started getting a lot of ads relating to pretty creative majors, like, photography, cinematography, film. And I also get a lot of architecture ads now as well. And a few interior design, but since architecture kind of falls, like all interior design falls, like, within the the category of architecture, I basically get both.

The decision to change her major was not something Sage took lightly. Sage was dealing with a lot during her fall semester, school work, mental health issues, issues at home, college applications, and the anxiety of choosing a major and ultimately a career all as she was turning 18. All of this took a big toll on her and her mental health and deciding to switch her major to interior design was a difficult decision. She recounts a conversation she had with two friends in her robotics class earlier in the fall semester of her senior year. She says, "I told them I didn't enjoy computer science as much anymore and was unsure about majoring in it." One of my friends asked me, 'Well, what do you like?' And I said, "Interior design, I've been looking into it more, and even looked into different jobs." Speaking to me, she shares, "I want to work on a blank canvas, I don't care as much about the architectural side of designing space, but I don't

mind learning about it." Excitement exuberated from Sage. She was very enthusiastic about pursuing her creative side, something she ignored for so long. In the second recorded plática, during February of 2024, after Sage had submitted her college applications, I ask her to speak about her observations or things that stood out to her about the ads she was getting now for interior design. Below she elaborates on this.

Patricia: You kind of mentioned a lot of the ads you're getting are about like, "do this four week program in architecture" or whatever. So, is there anything else that you notice? … Any other things they catch your attention about, like the language like, anything you've noticed?

Sage: I guess, kind of in a way saying like, "Oh, you don't need to go to college". Like, it's just basically telling me, "Oh, like do our program instead of like go to college instead", you know, I get a lot like, general posts, sometimes they're just posting not as telling you, "Oh, like you should do our program. So you don't have to go to college. Because sometimes college don't teach you anything", which can be true, it just depends on which college you go to, you know, but it's just kind of in a way, they're trying to put themselves up there and persuade people to believe that you know, going to college is useless. Like it can be, but it just really depends on what, what school you're looking at, I guess. So I guess it's just they're trying to say, "Oh, just join our program, it's better than going to actual institution to learn".

Patricia: …Because I know, even before, when you were still getting a lot of ads for computer science and gaming. Yeah, I remember several of the ones you got were kind of like, "Oh, apply to this, this type of program. Like you can just get this credential. You don't need necessarily like a college degree for this". Do you think that has all influenced your decision? Or, do you ever look or do you ever click to learn more about those types of programs?

Sage: I always look in the comments saying, "Oh, it's like, this is honestly, like a money grab just how expensive it is", you know what I mean? For like a single program, a few will say, like, it's [much] better to, I guess, go to school to learn skills and architecture or interior design, like depending on what field of you know, architecture you want. It's better to go to school, because it's easier to learn with a classroom and an instructor, then having to do a program or learning by yourself. Like unless, you're you know, you're capable enough to but you believe that our school is going to help you better than you should go to school instead. Because I noticed that,

> architecture likely for me would be easier to learn at an institution. And programming is much easier to learn on your own because college kind of shows you and I guess teachers like a lot of the theory behind programming, like extra stuff, you possibly won't need in a career, I guess when you're working.

In our plática, Sage shares that the ads she had received for Interior design and other related creative fields aligned more with her interests, but were not interesting enough to get her to apply to the program. Like Vivian and Andrés, her college search in this digital *nepantla* space was filled with feedback loops of information connected to her shifting interests in college majors.

Like Andrés and Sage, Amíra also received a lot of repeated advertisements specifically from private universities. She shares,

> Honestly, my experience with advertisements online, it was very like I wouldn't use Instagram to search up anything for colleges, yet I would get a lot of college advertisements, but it usually was repeat so it was a lot of like Rice University. It was a lot of the same types of ads. And I don't know, I would screenshot them. I don't know if that was what was making them pop up. But whenever I would screenshot them and send them to you, I feel we both noticed it was usually the same school is the same advertisements. But personally for TikTok. I don't, I don't really get on TikTok. So, I don't know, I haven't seen anything on there. But I feel maybe it would be the same as how [Vivian], or [Yatziri] or [Andrés] were talking about. They wouldn't get people who talk about their university. Um, but I feel like whenever I would search up stuff about college, I wouldn't be at school, and I'd be using the school computer. So maybe that's why I didn't get as many ads for my major as I want as I could have gotten, you know,

like I would at school, I would search up,"What are the best schools?" You know, on Google. I would be, "What are the best schools for a psychology major?" And so maybe the algorithm just didn't go to me, maybe it would be on my school account.

Amíra received repeat advertisements for pre-college programs, as I discuss in Chapter 4. She observed that taking screenshots of these advertisements likely triggered the same repeat advertisements she received. She also later comments on, similar to what Andrés and Sage shared, how these advertisements were for pre-college programs and not from the actual school, something I discuss further in Chapter 4. She attributes these broad advertisements on her using her school account and computer for her college research in saying "the algorithm just didn't go to me." In a later plática, I ask why she thinks private schools were sending her ads, and she says her social media doesn't reflect her as a student. And "So seeing these ads, I'm like "they probably just know my age." This sentiment of receiving random information not catered to collaborators' interest was also shared by Vivian.

Despite what Vivian shared earlier about receiving specific content for neuroscience programs and schools she found useful in her college application process, she also makes a similar point to what other collaborators shared in that she received many repeat ads for schools she was not considering. Below, I ask her to share her thoughts about the ads she was receiving:

Patricia: What did you think when you're getting ads for these specific programs?

Vivian: Well, the thing is the schools that I did end up applying to were [from] ads that I saw like once or twice and then I started my like, I put those on my list. Or somehow my phone track that I Googled them or something. And I didn't get many ads from them anymore. But the ones I would see so repeated are the schools that I never Googled, because I just wasn't interested. Those are the ones that we get all the time like Chapman. They would send me so many things. And another one like the Masters

University, I didn't know that was a thing and stuff like that. Oh the Redland, the University of Redlands schools, I never really… or and High Point too.

Patricia: I saw, I was looking at the folder [of ads] you shared, it was like all of those…

Vivian: So at one point they got annoying, cuz I was like, "I'm literally not going to apply, please stop."

The repeat advertisements for schools and programs Vivian was not interested in frustrated her. Despite her lack of interest in these schools, Vivian continued to receive these advertisements. María felt that the advertisements she received were catered to students her age but not to her specifically. She mentioned to me she would have liked to receive advertisements and content personalized to her interests in history and law. I ask why she felt that way, and she replies:

María: Because I was getting information about the STEM, like engineering. And I'm not interested in that at all.

Patricia: Did you at all receive anything about law or history?

María: I didn't really got it, but most of it will go to engineering or biology, I guess. Like it was more marketed to my demographic than to me personally.

Patricia: What do you mean by demographic?

María: Because I notice, a lot of people around my age are interested in going to college for engineering, or biology. And it didn't feel like there's not enough ads of people who want to do history or want to get a law degree.

In this plática and later pláticas, María mentions receiving repeated ads for programs she was not interested in, including for Whitman College. She noticed that these repeated ads were broadly catered to students in her age demographic interested in STEM, but not to her specifically. This is critical because, in theory, collaborators should be receiving ads for programs and schools they are interested in like the UCs, but instead some collaborators like

Andrés and Sage received ads that felt scattered or honed in on a particular type of program– third party study abroad program or online learning certificate– for example. Others like Amíra, Vivian, and María felt the ads they received were entirely random and did not cater to their interests or college research. For example, Sage and Vivian on separate occasions mentioned receiving ads for Masters degree programs despite being high school students.

Digital advertisements on college choice: increased awareness and visibility of different institutions

Despite students' impressions about advertisements bombarding their inboxes, coming from random institutions, and a general disconnect with advertisements, students shared that receiving advertisements made them aware of the vast amount of postsecondary institutions out there, particularly those private and out of state. When I asked Sally in our last recorded plática if she thought the ads she received were effective, she replied, "I think so. Yeah, I don't think I would have maybe, I don't know, I would have been like, less willing to apply to privates." Indeed, during an early plática with Sally in April of her junior year, I asked if she would consider applying to private schools, and she told me she would consider it. By October of her senior year, we began discussing the common application and planning for her college essays. By November and December, I met with Sally a few times to provide feedback on her common application essay. At this time, she was interested in Caltech and Stanford University– both private California institutions.

In asking Amíra the same question about whether the ads she received were effective, she expressed disappointment in having missed deadlines for private schools and introduced to private school applications late during her senior year. Although she puts the onus on herself for

missing deadlines, she shares, "…like now my senior year learning about college. I mean, private college, the application. I felt overwhelmed the fact that I didn't know about it. And then so many deadlines I had already missed." She adds her thoughts about the effect of advertisements on her college choice process. She shares the following:

> I feel like the ads I was getting, since I believe most of them were private colleges or colleges I hadn't heard of. I could see why, let's say if I did apply, like, I went onto the common app… And say, I did go on to the common app and select the colleges, I would probably have more of an interest in the colleges that have been advertised to me than the colleges I hadn't heard of. So, you know, everyone knows, like Ivy League's, you know, like Harvard and Yale, but I feel like, for me, at least living on the west like Georgetown, and Case Western, those universities, I hadn't heard of them or like Rice, maybe, but mainly because of the ads. So I would have probably looked into them, and then also looked into their majors and what is best for me? And since I didn't maybe that's probably why like, it could be a little flawed, like my thinking, you know, I don't know.

A silver lining for Amíra was the newfound awareness of different types of institutions, particularly private out-of-state institutions. Had she felt prepared for applying to private colleges, she may have looked into the schools that advertised to her. Amíra returns to different spaces in her college-*conocimiento,* namely, *nepantla* in gathering more information about private schools, and *coatilcue* and *el compromiso,* informed by the advertisements and online information she received about private schools. Yatziri and Andrés both felt that receiving advertisements for private and out-of-state institutions offered them perspective into different options out there if they were to continue their education and informed their college

conocimiento similar to Amíra. I had asked Yatziri if she considered private schools to which she replies, "I would say I was considering it, but mainly, I knew that it wasn't for me personally. I felt starting off, my first year, at a California University, I felt it was safer for just need to, apply locally." She then continues to explain how although she was applying to private institutions now, she may in the future. She says,

> But it also gave me an idea like, oh, in case I want to, you know, further my education; I can go out of state and attend those universities. Or just for right now, I chose not to really do my research on those and just decided to stay locally. But I do, keep those universities in mind, like maybe in the future, I may apply to that program, or those schools.

Yatziri says advertisements for private schools provided her with more information about college, and if she decided to pursue a graduate degree, she might consider looking into private or out-of-state schools. In this same plática, Yatziri mentions how important being a part of EISP was to her in her ability to apply to college. As I have discussed in Chapter 2 and elsewhere in this chapter, collaborators are not making decisions about college in a vacuum and in addition to the online advertisements and content they received, they also received support from protective agents like Ms. Rendon. For example, protective agents can confirm what students are receiving or at times contradict and challenge certain perspectives to aid students in their college choice processes, like Yatziri's sister's clients who affirmed the great local public options for nursing. Similarly, Andrés mentions how he actually started his application process for the common application, but after spending a lot of time and energy applying to UCs and CSUs, he ended up not applying after all. He shares,

> I did consider it I was going until actually, I started the process of applying. I made accounts for a lot of Ivy League's, but I flaked on them. Yeah, I kind of put them aside and I focused on UCs and CSU. And then once I was done with I was kind of drained. And so I was like, "I don't really want to go to that right now", even though I had all the information already. Like I already had a lot of PIQ's written and essays. I feel I could have made it work. But no, I didn't. I never got through the, to complete them. I mean, I'm still open to the idea of getting my master's. Some I mean, there's still an option to transfer to an Ivy League or or I don't know, private college.

Speaking to whether he thought ads he received were effective, he replies,

> I mean, I feel some of the ads were effective. Because even before I even started the application process, I did have a general idea of what I want to do in college. Because I knew I wanted to go into engineering, I saw a lot of ads and content for engineering that I was getting would affect my college search and college applications. So it would really depend to what I was interested in.

For Andrés, some ads he received that were specific to engineering before starting his application process informed his digital *nepantla* space of college knowledge and helped him gain confidence in what he wanted to study in college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). In addition to ads, Andrés made a comment about the support programs he was a part of EISP and a math and science academy program at his school that exposed him to different career opportunities in engineering and offered him mentorship in speaking to engineers and having them share their experience in college and what they studied.

Sage makes a similar comment about how the ads and content she was receiving and engaging with online informed her thoughts about which major to choose. Speaking to cyclical nature of online research and ads, she says,

> Right? Since I was doing research as well, that's, you know, when I got more, different types of ads… But the more I gotten content about it [interior design], and the more I got ads about it, the more it made me think that maybe I should really think about what I wanted to do, rather than something that I'm probably not gonna like, or get burnt out doing, because I'm doing it for so long or thinking about it for so long, you know?

Sage discusses the process of searching for information about interior design and the feedback loop of receiving ads, which then made her rethink her major. While the vast majority of ads were ineffective for students, this exposure from the ads they received made them consider private and out-of-state schools as future options. As mentioned earlier, for Vivian, the research she was doing, ads and content she was engaging with, opened up different possibilities. As I discuss below, social media content played a big role for students in their college search and application process.

Impact of social media: the good, the bad, and the ugly

Bad publicity isn't always good publicity

Negative social media content helped sway collaborators' decisions about applying and enrolling in schools they were on the fence about. This was the case for Sally, as I discussed in the beginning vignette. Vivian and María also share a similar experience. For example, in the second recorded plática with Vivian on January 28, 2024, I asked if other ads and emails she

received influenced her decision to apply to a college or university. Vivian shared that the only Ivy League institution she was initially applying to was Brown University because of their open curriculum and Program in Liberal Medical Education baccalaureate-MD, but that she received a large pamphlet for Columbia University in the mail, which made her consider applying. However, she reassessed her decision on enrolling at Columbia following a recent influx of troubling videos on her TikTok feed. In our conversation below, she shared her thoughts.

Patricia: You ended up applying to Columbia?

Vivian: Yeah, I did. But, because of the TikToks I've been seeing recently. If I get rejected, I kind of won't be sad about it. Because so many of the freshmen and sophomores are currently transferring out.

Patricia: Oh, why?

Vivian: Because they say most specifically, the first-gen and low-students are transferring out. Because they're saying that's it's basically high school over again, if you are not, if you aren't rich, if you aren't privileged, it's going to be so hard for you to succeed here. Because there are no support programs, your advisors suck. Like they [TikTok content creators] are, "Yeah, you can sign up for that class and then it turns out it is not even a class you need for your major, or for your prerequisite for your pre-med track or pre-law. It literally sucks, you will have zero support. Like if you're going to be successful here, it's going to take every single thing you've got."

Receiving a large blue pamphlet in the mail as I discussed above in my fieldnotes, influenced Vivian to consider Columbia University. However, after she had applied and seen content online, she questioned her decision to attend Columbia. For Vivian, feeling supported as a first-gen student from a lower-income background was paramount. Videos on TikTok circulating about Columbia's reputation in not supporting students like her informed her thoughts about attending Columbia. In the last recorded plática with María as she reflected on her college application process, she shared that she applied to all of the UCs. I asked her if this was

something she always planned to do. In our conversation she replies and remembers why she ended up not applying to UC Davis.

Patricia: Remind me were you always planning to apply to all the UCs or is that a decision you make later on?

María: So I will always want to apply to all UCs but after I saw some information about UC Davis I decided not to apply there.

Patricia: What information?

María: So I saw on TikTok…Oh, wait, it did affect me. [Patricia laughs]. I saw on TikTok that some people were really unhappy about UC Davis and how it was more of a STEM college. So I decided nevermind, I'm not going to go there no more.

Patricia: So like experiences that… where students were having negative experien…

María: So they're saying that they're having a bad time there that is really…Sorry, that there is really a lot of tension there that they're really critical by your academics, I don't know how to explain it, but it said it would be a negative environment.

Patricia: And so for you that that was a reason why you're like "Nah". If that would have been… if people would have been posting about a similar experience at another UC would you have?

María: Maybe it's because I've never really been interested in UC Davis. So that just pushed me even further not to apply there.

María, Vivian, and Sally all were deterred from applying to specific institutions from the negative content they were seeing on social media– this negative content was the final straw for schools they were not fully committed to.

When College seems attainable: "Influencers made college look cool"

As I described in Chapter 2, Sage sought college information from Reddit and YouTube. In our second recorded plática, Sage shared more about her using these social media platforms to obtain college information in her *nepantla* space. She says,

> I want to hear from students how like they felt. I want to know experiences of people who kind of came from the same background as me you know what I mean… I wonder if there's any, students at [public CA four-year institution] who are like as disadvantaged as me, but still, you know, decided to do Interior Design. If they enjoyed it, did they struggle more than other students? I just want to know, because I don't like since I'm, I come from a disadvantaged background and just now I realized I'm more of like a creative person you know what I mean. So I wasn't able to express that until, like more, I guess more recently and so that means a lot of my skills and my creativity are kind of like underdeveloped but you know, over time they will develop, but it's just I want to know, experiences of people who kind of dealt with the same thing.

Despite being at the top 5% of her class, Sage was worried that she would have a hard time in her major; she attributes this to her being from a disadvantaged background and not having cultivated her creative side from an early age. Sage, as I mentioned earlier, also participated in a summer research program at a UC that gave her exposure to people from different backgrounds, especially from affluent backgrounds. She recalled an incident where a student was harassing and making threats and attributed it to his parents' money and status as to why program administrators were slow to kick him out of the program while other students were kicked out for minor things. Similar to Sally, Sage was aware of the racial and ethnic dynamics

at her school and was committed to supporting students like her from Asian and Southeast Asian communities in finding community and allyship. These experiences, coupled with her desire to learn more about students' perspectives in interior design from disadvantaged backgrounds like her, led her to research on Reddit and YouTube. She came across a YouTube video and she recounts that experience to me:

> Right, I knew this person. Well not knew, but I watched this person, on YouTube that wants to do art animation. And like, 2d, they wanted to do a Bachelor's of fine arts, but they came from a disadvantaged background. And they were about to go through their third year, but they decided to go back to just the regular Bachelor of Arts instead of fine arts, because everyone was so ahead of them. Like of, using the programs and stuff like that, that kind of made them discouraged to continue on with their fine arts degree, because of how difficult it was and how far behind they were, you know, and that kind of just made me think a little bit as well. I wonder if that's going to be the same thing for me. But, you know, in a way, I'm still kind of exposed to the programs that it's like, required for like the major. So I'm, scared, but also, kind of confident, like, probably a little bit confident, you know, but it's just looking back at her experience. It kind of, makes sense why she decided to do a bachelor's in arts instead because everyone was so you know, ahead of her and she was like, she didn't get to experience those types of programs when she was in high school, you know?

This YouTube video gave Sage a perspective she deemed real and authentic from a student that appeared to also come from a disadvantaged background like hers. This video was sobering for Sage in that it exposed the challenges this student experienced and provided Sage

with a transparent perspective, something she did not get from advertisements. This video and other Reddit posts informed Sage's college *conocimiento*, from the digital *nepantla* space of college research, the *coatlicue* space of anticipating college obstacles, *el compromiso* of applying to college, and *coyolxauhqui* in choosing a college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). For Sally, seeing experiences of students that looked like her was also important and informed her college *conocimiento*. In an early plática, she shares the following:

> So, there's a for you page [on TikTok], which is based on stuff that you like and everything. And there's like a following page. I follow so many people, but I never looked at that page. I only look at my for you [page]. But anytime I see something or someone and I'm like, "Oh, they're so cool. I want to be like them."…Most of the time if I see someone specific, that's Latina and like at a big school, a big fancy school, or I follow them where if I was… if I see someone who's a girl and in STEM and at a good school or like someone that I see that is, I don't know something I can major in that I see myself majoring in. I follow them right away…

Seeing content from Latinas in STEM at "good school[s]" for Sally was alluring. She wanted to see content from people that looked like her, were pursuing STEM degrees, and attended "big fancy school[s]." In responding to my question about perception of ads, María responds that some of the advertisements she received on Instagram were focused on financial aid and that made college appear more "attainable." In the excerpt from our plática below, she says:

> María: So the ads on Instagram since they were talking about financial aid, I felt like going to college was more attainable. I can actually go to it. Because there's so many programs that help people [who] are like me, and

Instagram on TikTok are the influencers made college look, it made it look cool. Like, I want to go there. Because it made it seem more casual, like more fun.

Patricia: Yeah, it made it like more tangible [cat meows in the background, both laugh]… yeah, because maybe like, it seems so abstract, I kind of have an idea, but I don't, but then other people are posting about their experience, and it makes it more like "Oh, like, that's what it's like".

María: Yeah, because on Instagram, it didn't make college [an] educational place. Only Google. It may seem like a place like just a college. But then when I go on TikTok. I can actually see myself there, I thought I got better, a better picture of it. Like I got to see the community there and how the students live there. They felt more like it brought it to light.

Patricia: Do you remember any of your favorites? Like videos you saw on TikTok? What stood out to you about what people were posting about their experience, do you remember?

María: I think it was this video from UC Berkeley that this girl she was going around asking people questions, what's your favorite book, and it showed me how like college students there. Like, to me, back then when I was younger, I thought college students were super formal. Like, I didn't really relate to that. But it showed me I can relate to the college life there.

Student influences posting about their college experience "made college look cool." For María, being able to see herself represented on TikTok and connect with college life was both inspiring and also something she could actually attain because it made it "less scary". She shares her analysis of different social media platforms. Instagram made college more attainable, Google made college seem too formal, and TikTok made college seem cool. As an avid reader, someone who enjoys English literature, seeing people talk about their favorite book was a point of connection for her. In asking María if she could distinguish between what was unpaid and what was real content, she mentions the number of followers a page has; the higher the number, the more likely it was sponsored. Second, María was skeptical of overly positive feedback. This finding speaks to the importance of authenticity. Collaborators craved real experiences from real students in their college search and application process.

Student recommendations for digital engagement

A large majority of ads felt random, irrelevant, or uninteresting to students. Some sparked annoyance and frustration for the frequency and persistence. However, not all ads were felt this way by collaborators. Some were effective in piquing students' interest. In this section, I discuss students' recommendations for better engagement.

Content relevant to students: "An actual taste of like, what it's like"

Advertisements or even content posted by university- affiliated pages were not weighed the same as content posted by students. Collaborators perceived content from students as more reliable and less biased. For example, María echos this point, she says,

> So I'm on Instagram and on Google the ads I saw, it seemed bias because those were the actual colleges myself. Like, they were saying, "Oh, this is the best college for you". But I don't really trust it. Because, of course, you say that it's from the college and from TikTok it felt more personalized, and I felt more like I trusted the review more, because it's from students that go there, it was unbiased it's like a first hand account. So that's why I was interested in those more.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, collaborators were critical of the information they were receiving and even more so when it came to advertisements from colleges and universities. This is consistent with scholarship on advertising speaking to the efficacy of advertisements in their ability to catch users attention (Hwang, 2020). Vivian makes a similar point. At the end of our plática, I ask Vivian if there is anything else she wants to add reflecting on her college application process.

Patricia: Is there anything else that you would like to add, it doesn't have to be about digital ads, but just in general about your college search or your college application process?

Vivian: Oh, I'll say this. It's not ads, but I feel what really worked for me is the propaganda that their own students give to the schools because like, once you started looking for schools, like even on TikTok, for example, like if I put in like, especially the "day in my life, at blank", those really helped me because I got to see students like their actual day to day life, like, "Come with me to freaking bio blank or blank at UCLA", or like "Spend the day with me at Brown" or like that, I feel that helped me because, I got to, see through their eyes how their day-to-day was, and I was like, "Okay, I like that. I vibe with that. I can do that."

Patricia: So you prefer the content from coming from the page of a real student? Yeah, versus say like, UCLA, it's like UCLA, TikTok, the TikTok for UCLA, and they have that it's like a student that did a video for them. I'm like, is it the same or different for you?

Vivian: It's, it's different because for example, if you search up UCLA on TikTok, you're gonna get like videos and people are like, this is what happened, UCLA, those are not sponsored. Those are the students doing that video because they want to, but then you can also get like one that is like, by the UCLA page, and I feel like those are… I'm not saying that they're lying the schools, but like, what's it called? They can censor it? They can edit things out. While the students they're like, especially during finals like a bunch of students were like, "Come with me to pull an all nighter because it's what you're gonna have to do to pass these exams". The schools never will say that. Yeah. And I feel like you get to get like an actual taste of what it's like.

Patricia: Like more authentic.

Vivian: Yeah.

Vivian and María could see through advertisements as biased and produced, while content from students appeared more transparent and reliable in that they shared both good and bad aspects of college. Students crave the student point of view (POV), especially, for my collaborators, who are all first-generation. Being on social media gave them a perspective no advertisement or Google search page could, real-life experiences from students. And what's more, is that collaborators wanted not just any perspectives, they wanted content specific to

them– first-generation, low-income, students of color. As I have discussed, this was especially salient to Sally and Sage.

For Andrés and Amíra, content about finances would have been helpful for them in their college search and application process. Andrés makes this point by saying the following,

> I mean, I feel more information than I would have liked to seen was kinda their financial, the financial piece of college, whether it be like this is an average amount of what students get in financial aid at this university, or this is how much you can expect to be in debt for this program at this university. Only because it is kind of a gamble. Sometimes. We're like, I'm applying to the school because it's really nice. And their program is really good. But then you're also like, I'm applying, but can I really use it? Can I realistically go due to how much it is? And so I feel a lot of low income schools or like communities really need more of that. "This is how much is gonna cost." And this is "how much financial aid we can provide you?" You know?

Andrés says applying to college is "kind of a gamble." On a separate occasion he shared that he was likely going to have to take out loans for college because his dad's income for the 2021 tax return was a lot higher and it did not reflect their current income. After suffering a work injury and requiring knee surgery, Andrés's dad was unable to work and had to go on disability services. This, of course, was not reflected on his fafsa application because his father's 2021 tax returns did not provide this nuance. Therefore, Andrés was eager for information about financing college and the average financial aid offered to students like him at institutions he was interested in applying to. For Amíra, learning about how students from California who attend out-of-state

institutions and got funding would have helped her consider applying to schools out-of-state or private institutions. She shares the following:

> I mean, it could be that we come from a lower-income community. But I feel when I think of colleges, especially you know, my sisters went to a CSU and UC, like I can, they didn't really struggle with money financially, because they found their way, you know. They found their way into the school, they got funding. And I feel other universities, since I don't have like a pathway to look into or it's not really too heard about my school, at least, that some of our students go off to school outside of California. I feel it just gives me way, so maybe like, advertisements that are kind of showing that lower income students are able to apply, or are able to get funded, you know, like I do here, "like all of your parents make less than this, you get full scholarship", but I don't see that. I mean, maybe I don't see that one-on-one, I can search it up. I can see the students that do, but it's like, I don't know them personally. I don't know, how they're living. Is it really like? Do they really feel good about how they're getting financial? Like, how they're getting their financial aid, or is it they're struggling, you know, so maybe seeing that the schools could financially help at least students like me, you know. For example, USC, I know I always see videos from students that go there and "They're like daddy's money." And, ya know, I don't want to apply to that school. Like, I don't got daddy's money. But I do know, there's those like, scholarships and like, full, full ride. But I feel whenever I think of full ride, I think of like, valedictorian students or, I don't know, like, not me. I'm not saying I get bad grades, but I'm just saying, I'm not valedictorian at my school… I could

apply to I could apply to scholarships, but I feel like I don't know, maybe that internal guilt of like, the fact that I could have done better, I don't know.

The path to a CSU or UC was familiar to Amíra because as she mentioned, her sisters had already paved the way for her. Applying to a private or out-of-state school was not. Receiving information about how students from low-income communities are able to finance their education at particular universities would have been helpful for Amíra. Videos about students at USC who are able to attend because they "got daddy's money" was even more deterring for Amíra whose parents are not able to afford private school tuition. She understood that some students are able to get full rides based on merit or their household income, but again, she felt that she was not competitive enough for these scholarships and unsure about the process. She adds, "I was just saying that advertisements for low income.. since advertisements are so broad. Like, that's probably why I see them like they are not going to accept me like I can't even afford their school." This was a point of conflict for Amíra who eventually grew curious about private institutions because of the ads she was receiving and hearing her peers in the group plática speak about their thoughts and experiences. It made her feel guilty for having missed deadlines and not applying.

In addition to what was shared by students, María ends with her thoughts on advertisements she received. "So I thought the language is very formal sometimes like, [to] find out what they actually say, I have to google it, 'what does this mean?' And I believe it was not really friendly to people…" The inaccessibility of language in the advertisements was off-putting for María and further influenced her to seek coverage of the college experience from college students on social media.

Personalized touch

Ads that were too broad, generic, or irrelevant to students did not make an impression on students. When I ended the second recorded plática with each collaborator, I asked what they would have liked to receive as they were searching for and applying to college. Collaborators shared a common stance of receiving content that was personalized and specific to them. For example, Vivian shares that content using generic statements like "Discover blank at blank" felt irrelevant to her because she already knew exactly what she wanted to study. She explains that this type of content might be helpful for other students who are still exploring what they want to study, but not for her. At times, she felt that ads did not know much about her because she was receiving ads from master's and PhD programs. However, ads that were specific to her interest in neuroscience felt personalized, for example, she says, "My FBI agent personalized this for me," in response to content she received for neuroscience programs. What worked for Vivian was ads that catered to her and her interests. When talking about Reed College, she says, they were smart in sending her advertisements like "Look at this research that our neuroscience professors are working on." Ultimately, this influenced her to consider and apply to Reed College.

In the same respect, Sally enjoyed reading through descriptive emails from schools. She tells me emails providing long descriptions of different campus perspectives were something she enjoyed reading. Andres and Yatziri had also mentioned to me that they were more likely to read through emails and engage with content from schools they were actually considering (for Andres and Yatziri, that was mostly UCs and CSUs). Language about financial aid and collaborative environment. Sally also felt that she did not enjoy seeing advertisements from schools on her

Instagram; that is not the purpose of Instagram for her, and would of preferred seeing videos in email.

Similar to what Sage, Sally, and María shared earlier about receiving information about their intended majors, Amíra and Yatziri agree with them. Amíra would have preferred information about her major to learn about different clubs offered at a campus. Yatziri, as I discussed earlier, did not receive as much information from the UCs and CSUs and wished she would of received more information earlier in her college application process. Would of liked more information about certain majors, including nursing and others she considered.

Both Amíra and Yatziri discuss how the support from Ms. Rendon, the EISP program, and other institutional agents was paramount to their college application process. Yatziri shares that she would not have been able to apply to college without Ms. Rendon's support. It was institutional agents like Ms. Rendon that made a difference for students.

Conclusion

Collaborators' perceptions of college were informed by online content they engaged with in their college search and application process. Students identified the cyclical nature of information they received that was triggered by their online behaviors. This information, at times, informed their subsequent searches, activating a feedback loop of college information– a digital *nepantla* space of college-*conocimiento*. Furthermore, I find collaborators were overwhelmed by the vast amount of emails they received. They critically share their thoughts about private and out-of-state ads they received despite their lack of interest in these schools. Interestingly, collaborators noticed an absence of ads and information provided by UCs despite

their research and investment in applying to UCs. While students largely ignored most advertisements, they did report an increase in their awareness of different types of postsecondary institutions. The largest influencer and source of college knowledge for collaborators was content on social media. Social media served as a filter, helping collaborators identify aspects of students' college experiences at particular institutions.

CHAPTER 4: BAIT AND SWITCH: UNPACKING PRE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS IN THE COLLEGE SEARCH PROCESS

Introduction

Vivian and her mom sat next to each other, and I sat across from them on the end of the couch, forming an L. I introduced myself and talked about my journey through higher education and the purpose of the study. Vivian's mom shared her own story, earning a law degree in Mexico and being unable to practice in the U.S. She smiled from ear to ear as she shared more about Vivian's passion for medicine. *Quiere ser doctora* [she wants to be a doctor], she told me. I learned that Vivian aspires to be a medical doctor, a neurosurgeon, to be exact. We talked for a while and reviewed the consent process. Vivian's mom remembered that Vivian got an invitation in the mail to attend a leadership conference for high school students interested in medicine. Her mom brought out the flyers, had me read them, and helped them determine if this was a good opportunity. "It sounds like a good opportunity, but it is a big sacrifice!" I told them as I looked at the dollar signs on the flyer– $5k for a little over a week. Her mom insisted, *Ella ya ha sido admitida; solo tenemos que pagar. En otros programas que son gratuitos, ella tiene que enviar una solicitud y no esta garantizado que la acepten.* [She has been admitted to this program, and we just have to pay. She has to apply to other free programs and is not guaranteed to get in]. Despite my skepticism, I did not know enough about this program and was not adequately prepared to offer advice. Vivian shared that she applied for the scholarship but was not accepted. I was conflicted and told them I would look more into it and get back to them.

On January 29, 2023, I memoed after meeting Vivian and her mom for the first time to review the consent and assent process. In that meeting, her mom asked for my opinion about an invitation for her daughter to this pre-college summer program– The National Youth Leadership Forum (NYLF) in medicine. I had never heard of this program and told them it sounded like a great opportunity, but it was a big sacrifice for them to pay close to $5,000. Her mother was not satisfied and insisted this was too big of an opportunity to pass and would help her daughter get experience and get into medical school. I agreed but told them other free opportunities would likely arise. I followed up weeks later, and Vivan told me her mom and dad agreed to pay for the program in smaller payments. I wished I was better equipped to give Vivian and her mother feedback. It was not until collaborators started uploading more advertisements for these pre-college summer- and -online programs that I realized this was more than just a singular event. The program did not select Vivian because of her outstanding achievements– albeit being a highly studious and brilliant student. Instead, several collaborators received advertisements from similar pre-college online and summer programs, some claiming to be prestigious and highly competitive despite not requiring an application process.

A quick Google search for "pre-college programs" returns several web pages for pre-college programs from top lauded universities– UCLA, USC, Brown, Harvard, Columbia, and several more. A pre-college program, according to Cornell's School of Continuing Education, is "…an educational experience the [sic] helps high school students prepare for the transition to a college environment" (Cornell SCE Precollege Studies, n.d.). The allure of these programs stems from the opportunity to experience an elite institution and the anxieties students and parents have about getting a leg up in college admissions (Kim, 2019). On paper, these programs promote an

enriching experience, but the hefty price tag and minimal advantage carried in admissions decisions suggest the motivation for these programs is likely profit (Kim, 2019; Slaughter et al., 2004). The advertisements collaborators received for pre-college programs were different than free or low-cost programs funded by government and private entities like Upward Bound aimed at fortifying and easing underrepresented students' transition to college.

The Economic Opportunity Act, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, gave rise to the first TRIO initiative, Upward Bound, in 1964 (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Swail & Perna, 2002). These early intervention programs were created to help offset the disparities in K-12 schooling and provide underrepresented students with supplemental support in navigating the college admissions and preparation process (Swail & Perna, 2002). Upward Bound uniquely exposes high school students to college through afterschool, weekend, and summer programming on college campuses (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Swail & Perna, 2002). Since the introduction of TRIO programs and other federally funded college access initiatives, nongovernmental and institution-sponsored programs have been created to mirror the impact of TRIO initiatives, including summer bridge programs offered across many colleges and universities (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Swail & Perna, 2002).

Advertisements for pre-college programs students receive from top lauded universities charging upwards of a few thousand dollars may have different ethos than free or reduced-cost pre-college summer bridge programs for underrepresented students. In this chapter, I employ a critical discourse analysis of advertisements for pre-college online and summer programs to shed light on this pre-college program industry impacting low-income, first-generation high school students of color. In documenting how pre-college programs strategize to recruit

underrepresented high school students in this study, I bridge the literatures in enrollment management and higher education marketing.

From January 2023 to March 2024, eight collaborators assisted me in collecting the digital advertisements they received from colleges, universities, and other programs promoting college or college-adjacent programs and services. Collectively, collaborators assisted me in collecting 2,126 advertisements, screen recordings, and screenshots of digital advertisements they have received from digital platforms, including search engines, social media sites (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, YouTube), and their email. I employ a critical discourse analysis of 88 advertisements for pre-college and summer programs in this analysis. The broader discourse on college preparation, including pre-college summer programs, fuels students' anxiety about college admissions and impacts their decisions. Understanding how students make sense of these programs' messaging and recruiting tactics is critical to researchers and policymakers concerned with equity in college access. The research questions guiding the analysis are the following:

1. What are the characteristics of pre-college summer program advertisements?
    a. What promotional strategies are used in advertisements?
    b. What information is provided in the advertisements?
2. What discursive practices are present in advertisements for pre-college summer programs?
3. How do collaborators make sense of advertisements for pre-college programs?

Literature Review

Academic Capitalism

In discussing the relevant literature that shapes the present study, I situate the literature on college marketing and recruiting vis-a-vis academic capitalism in the commodification of higher education and the pursuit of tuition revenue. The growing research on enrollment management has focused on traditional modes of recruiting students into undergraduate programs (e.g., off-campus visits) (Salazar et al., 2021; Stevens, 2007), and a smaller subset of the literature has focused on studying digital recruiting methods for college admissions (e.g., social media marketing and digital advertising) (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Peruta & Shields, 2018). I explore how scholarship on recruitment and pre-college summer programs, though treated separately, can provide valuable insights into the growing intersection of digital marketing and pre-college initiatives, highlighting their critical role in university admissions and recruitment.

Slaughter et al. (2004) define academic capitalism as pursuing a higher education driven by market-like activities, privatization, commercialization, and consumerism. Several factors contribute to academic capitalism, including the new economy in which raw knowledge is claimed through legal mechanisms to be marketed and sold as products and services, the neoliberal state of prioritizing commercialization and privatization, outsourcing to intermediating organizations for labor and services, and engaging in market-like behaviors.

The new economy treats knowledge as raw material that could be claimed through legal mechanisms and marketed as products or services (Slaughter et al., 2004). Some ways colleges

and universities participate in and- contribute to the new economy is by claiming knowledge through patents, copyrights, and trademarks (Slaughter et al., 2004). The neoliberal state contributes to the new economy in the changing priorities of government, from social welfare service to supporting privatization, commercialization, regulation, and reregulation of state functions (Slaughter et al., 2004). Colleges and universities have endorsed and benefited greatly from the neoliberal state in higher education. For example, the shifting funding responsibilities from institutions to students, rising tuition, and rise in loans over financial aid in the last five decades have promoted the identity of 'students as empowered consumers' of higher education (Slaughter et al., 2004, p. 483). The increasing reliance on tuition revenue lends itself to an academic capitalist learning regime and the adoption and institutionalization of enrollment management as an organizational concept focused on consolidating the functions of admissions, financial aid, marketing, and recruiting (Hossler et al., 1990; Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). As a result, enrollment management offices increase their marketing and advertising spending to attract and reach prospective students, specifically those who can pay full price and increase tuition revenue. To this end, "Colleges and universities are initiating marketlike and market practices, and forming partnerships with business to exploit the commercial potential of students. As institutions adopt more economic, proprietary orientation to students, the consumption versus the education dimensions of a college education become increasingly emphasized." (Slaughter et al., 2004, p. 478).

At the institutional level, intermediating networks across public, nonprofit, and private higher education sectors give rise to the reliance on outsourcing to external organizations to create products and services. As such, these products and services can result in the creation of

certification programs at two-year and/or four-year institutions and the uptake in institutions offering off-curricula programs. An example of this is through Online Program Managers (OPMs), companies assisting with the development of online programs and degrees offered at top-lauded colleges and universities (Carey, 2019). Rather than increase access to higher education, these costly programs charge students more than they cost to make and operate (Carey, 2019). Moreover, institutions adopt market-like behaviors to compete for external resources and increase profits through strategic enrollment management and online credential programs.

Academic capitalism can help explain the rise in marketing practices enacted by postsecondary institutions as a recruitment tool for student monies. This is relevant to this paper in two ways. First, how colleges and universities strategize for recruiting prospective students through digital advertising is part and parcel of market-like behaviors that contribute to the new economy. Second, the intermediating networks between colleges and universities and external organizations in outsourcing to online program managers OPMs and external organizations to design and create costly certification/off-curricular programs is important to analyze empirically. Taken together, scholarship in higher education enrollment management and marketing has largely ignored the for-profit pre-college program market, allowing these programs to go unnoticed and perpetuating the predatory inclusion of historically marginalized students.

Marketing in Higher Education

The rise in competition, both in the U.S. and abroad, prompted a market orientation to higher education, culminating in the adoption of business-centered marketing approaches to

reach students (Dill, 2003; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Slaughter et al., 2004). Despite the emergence of marketing practices in higher education by administrators in the 1970's, the formalization of marketing practice gained traction in the 1980's (Litten, 1980). The seminal article by Hemsley-Brown an Oplatka (2006), offers a look into the emergence of research on marketing in higher education in the 1980's, broadly defining marketing as a systematic process of planning and implementing programs to communicate the value of such programs to an interested market to meet organizational objectives (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Kotler, 1995; Kotler & Goldgehn, 1981). In this way, marketing in higher education became critical to one core pillar of strategic enrollment management focused on the recruitment of students (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Maringe & Gibbs, 2008). Despite mixed responses and criticism of the student as customer positioning in higher education marketing (Slaughter et al., 2004), others have argued that treating students as consumers of a service– a higher education– increases students' experiences as their needs and wants become prioritized (Guilbault, 2018; Maringe & Gibbs, 2008).

The literature in higher education marketing has broadly focused on institutional marketing communications such as different forms of social media advertising (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021), university branding through efforts to differentiate from competitors and increase institutional reputation (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), and applying business marketing strategy principles to identify potential markets and reach prospective students (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). These different branches of higher education marketing literature speak to different, interconnected components of marketing. I

focus specifically on the application of marketing strategy and marketing communications in higher education.

Marketing Strategy in Higher Education

Marketing segmentation is one approach to marketing strategy, and it refers to the process of splitting and dividing markets based on customers' characteristics, behaviors, and decision-making (Hemsley-Brown, 2020). Market segmentation is an established practice in business and higher education and takes on many approaches, including segmenting based on geographic, demographic, behavioral, and psychographic factors (Hemsley-Brown, 2020; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Empirical scholarship in higher education segmentation has focused on approaches to create market segments and identify the "right students" (Harrison-Walker, 2010, p. 192). In one study, Ghosh et al. (2008) found that using institutional enrollment data to create student segments is a cost-effective approach to identifying other student segments. A different study focused on creating a measure to segment based on prospective students' rational and emotional factors in their college decision-making process (Angulo et al., 2010). Angulo et al.'s (2010) analysis generated six student segments, including rational factors in line with the extant literature informing students' college decisions, including institutional image, cost, academic and career opportunities as well as emotional factors typically not discussed at length in student college decision-making such as personal development and supporting ones family economically. Taken together, segmenting in higher education marketing and enrollment management is an established practice, but not without criticism as some caution against discrimination in segmenting students based on certain factors and marketing to such students (Hemsley-Brown, 2020; Jaquette & Salazar, 2024; Salazar et al., 2022).

A different marketing approach, referred to as the marketing mix or the 4 P's, Product, Price, Place, and Promotion, makes up a set of marketing tools institutions use to elicit a response from their target markets (Ivy, 2008; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). In traditional marketing, the 4 P's make up the product being sold by a company, the price of the product, the place where products are distributed, and the promotion used to advertise the product (Ivy, 2008). In the context of higher education, the product is arguably a service, a degree, and associated raw materials of education. Hence students are considered the customers (Slaughter et al., 2004), and the degree is the product. The price is the cost including tuition and fees; the place is the modality of instruction, including in-person or online instruction, and the promotion is all the tools institutions use to promote their services and offerings through advertising and promotional efforts (Ivy, 2008). Researchers argue that the traditional marketing mix does not capture the needs and wants of prospective MBA students and thus have developed other P's to align with their intended audience, including program, prominence, prospectus, and premiums where other factors students sought in selecting a program (Ivy, 2008; Lim et al., 2020).

Marketing strategy, therefore, is informative and effective in enrollment management practices aimed at recruiting prospective students in how market segments of prospective students are identified and, how those segments are then segmented, how institutions target and position themselves through market communication. Advertising is part of a larger marketing strategy informed by different moving pieces.

Market Communications

Marketing communication also referred to as promotion or advertising, focuses on tactics used for the purpose of attracting the attention of the intended customer (WebFX, n.d.). A lot of

what we know from marketing in higher education is because of market research from education consultant firms (EAB, 2018). For example, research reports, insight papers, and blogs discuss different marketing strategies informed by their proprietary data with their partners (EAB, 2018). Tactics include employing a multichannel approach by using both traditional and digital advertising approaches, hiring micro influencers (Kerman, 2024), reaching parents, and making content more personalized to prospective students (Noel-Levitz, 2020b).

While small, the empirical higher education marketing communication research have studied traditional marketing strategies such as college viewbooks (Hartley & Morphew, 2008), direct mail (Tapp et al., 2004), and in the last two decades with the advent of the internet, more digitized approaches to advertising including, tv (Marifian, 2024), website (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014), display ads (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2020), and social media advertising (Rutter et al., 2016). The practice of advertising in higher education education dates back several decades, with institutions using college viewbooks to promote elements of their campus to attract prospective students (Durgin, 1998; Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Osei-Kofi et al., 2013). Through a content analysis of college viewbooks from 48 four-year colleges and universities in the U.S., Hartley & Morphew (2008) found institutions promoted messages about the individual benefits and advantages over the collective purpose of higher education, including the formative nature of a college education, academic and economic outcomes, and campus amenities and aesthetics. Saichaie and Morphew's (2014) study examining college websites found similar results, suggesting colleges and universities communicate particular messages to prospective students focused on social mobility and credentialism.

Research focused on the market for prospective students have identified ways colleges and universities obtain and purchase student data through student lists from College Board and ACT (Jaquette et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2022). These student lists are used for the application of different marketing strategies to funnel students down the enrollment funnel (EAB, 2018).

Research on higher education advertising has largely focused on the demographic targeting of advertisements (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2023), institutional advertising spend by sector (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2020), and the use of paid search strategies to optimize visibility on search engine results pages (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). In particular, scholarship from fields such as computer science, communications, and information sciences has examined the racial discrimination embedded in platforms promoting colleges, universities, and college scholarships. Studies have found that these platforms not only target specific groups but also systematically exclude others based on how the advertising algorithms operate (Chang et al., 2021; Imana et al., 2024).

This research is crucial because targeted advertising and market segmentation strategies are driven by the identification and classification of potential markets. As evidenced by the practice of purchasing student lists, these segmented marketing strategies often involve discriminatory practices in deciding which students are targeted and how they are grouped. Targeted advertisements are not random but are the result of technology-enabled sorting systems that prioritize certain groups over others. This sorting is not only about reaching the broadest audience but is designed to maximize return on investment. As a result, we must assume that students receiving these advertisements are being intentionally selected based on specific criteria, often aligned with institutional goals rather than equitable access to opportunities.

Despite the growing body of research on demographic targeting in higher education advertising, very few studies have examined how these advertisements actually influence students' college choice processes. While a few articles, such as Marifian (2024), have used experimental designs like difference-in-differences (DID) to explore how media exposure, particularly TV ads, can increase college-going behavior, especially in underrepresented, low-income, and Hispanic communities, the literature remains limited in understanding how students interpret and make decisions based on the advertisements they encounter. This gap is particularly notable in the context of pre-college programs, which often rely on targeted ads to recruit students, yet little research has focused on how these high-cost programs use advertising to shape perceptions of college access.

What is clear is that while marketing strategies in higher education are increasingly sophisticated, much of the existing research on this topic comes from market research firms like RNL and EAB, which focus primarily on enrollment management and recruitment practices. Academic scholarship has lagged behind these market-driven strategies, particularly when it comes to understanding the role of advertisements for pre-college programs. As these programs continue to proliferate, it is essential for future research to examine the impact of these advertisements on students' decision-making and the broader implications of marketing practices in higher education, particularly as they relate to equity and access.

Conceptual Frameworks

Racial and Platform Capitalism

Fourcade & Healy (2013) introduce classification situations as the output of a sophisticated credit-scoring process that reinforces social stratification. Technology and the market economy are two forces that gave rise to the development of classification situations where the growing availability of data on individuals allowed statistical models to predict risk, and the market economy, where risk assessments become economic opportunities (Fourcade & Healy, 2013). These actuarial technologies assign credit scores, structuring people's lives by determining where to open a bank account, buy a home (e.g., redlining policies), and access payday loans (Fourcade & Healy, 2013). As a result, classification situations promote the differentiation of access to economic opportunities and market segmentation of tailored products and services. Fourcade and Healy write, "In a world of scores rather than classes, economic technologies transform this dilemma. On the one hand, they objectify the material constraint by expanding consumer aspirations and the possibility of 'keeping up with the Joneses', albeit at differentiated prices and levels of vulnerability" (p. 568).

Fourcade & Healy (2017) ask a rhetorical question, "What do markets see when they look at people?" (p. 9). They argue that vast amounts of data are collected and then funneled into institutionalized scoring systems to create a form of capital (übercapital) that is then used for profit-making in tailoring and allocating goods and services to segmented consumers (Fourcade & Healy, 2017). Fourcade & Healy (2017) state that while acquiring data and using it to inform a calculation of a score is not new (e.g., IQ, Scholastic aptitude tests), the simultaneous large-scale availability of data and analysis has transformed into a new spirit of capitalism. Fourcade & Healy (2017) differentiate between the old classifier of guessing consumers' likes based on

information about them to a new classifier that is so immersed in individuals' lives that it is looking within:

> Increasingly, the market sees you from within, measuring your body and emotional states, and watching as you move around your house, the office, or the mall. This pushes firms away from an advertising model (even one with highly targeted advertising) toward one where people are dynamically classified, and where their existing classification situation allows for further diverse applications in the future. The new ideal is a personalized presence that is so embedded in daily routines that it becomes second nature. (p. 23)

Mediated by the introduction of the web, platform-based businesses have garnered immense power in monitoring, predicting, and influencing user behaviors (Srnicek, 2017). As such, platform capitalism helps explain the rise and dominance of digital platforms (e.g., Google, Facebook, TikTok, Apple) in leading the efforts of harvesting user data for capital accumulation (Srnicek, 2017). In higher education, the rise of marketization, privatization, and consumerization (Slaughter et al., 2004), made possible through digital and measurement technologies, promotes platform capitalism 'edu business' such as the global education business Pearson (Williamson, 2021, p. 53). For example, Pearson has invested extensively in Online Program Management (OPMs) to deliver online degrees, launched the Global Learning Platform for the delivery of 'on-demand' educational content through a subscription model, and tapped into digital records to produce quantified intelligence to product development (Williamson, 2021, p. 53). Indeed, platform capitalism in higher education is transforming higher education "as a market-like sector" (Williamson, 2021, pp. 62–63).

Cottom (2020) argues that in order to understand platform capitalism, one must also understand how race and racism are wedded to it through privatization by opacity and exclusion by inclusion. Opacity is a deliberate mechanism for making information inaccessible to safeguard and conceal because "If information is inaccessible, the objects of everyday life are too." (Cottom, 2020, p. 443). For example, the obscurity of algorithms contributes to our lack of understanding about their impact on our lives (o'neil, 2016). That is, the intentional obfuscation of information shields organizations from scrutiny and transparency, making it difficult to question their intentions. Similarly, inclusion by exclusion through predatory inclusion situated within the platform and racial capitalism refers to the logic of the deliberate inclusion of marginalized consumers into seemingly life-bettering opportunities, however, on terms that are extractive. Cottom (2020) argues in the context of higher education, predatory inclusion is enacted through the intentional recruitment of African American women into online for-profit and not-for-profit programs with high price tags, leading to these students taking on student loans that are harder to pay off and easier to default on (Cottom, 2017, 2020). Taken together, classification situations and platform capitalism promote inequities in practices deemed benevolent for communities of color.

Predatory Inclusion: "Exclusion by Inclusion"

Classification situations and platform capitalism are relevant to the study of digital advertising practices that affect the lives of students of color. Therefore, a discussion on the market-like behaviors of postsecondary institutions in advertising to prospective students is incomplete without acknowledging the ways capitalism and systemic racial oppression are intimately connected and operate in tandem. Racism is grounded in upholding white supremacy

and patriarchy and permeated through institutions, including businesses in media and marketing (Davis, 2018). While marketing can be viewed as a necessary tool for commerce, it is also a very powerful social influencer informing social, cultural, and political ideologies (Davis, 2018). This relationship between racism and promotional material in mass media and communication is an argument made by Noble (2018). She argues that Google's search algorithm has a deleterious impact on consumers, particularly maintaining negative stereotypes and harmful imagery and rhetoric about minoritized communities, Black women, and people of color because of the information returned from search results.

In the last few decades, there have been efforts to appeal to diversity ideals through targeting marketing efforts at multicultural audiences (Davis, 2018). These efforts use racial cues or cultural symbols to promote the idea of multiculturalism, but scholars have argued the efforts can be just as harmful to communities of color (Benjamin, 2019; Salas, 2020). Digital technologies perpetuate racism both through how they are engineered and the human behavioral data that feeds them. Programmers—who are often less diverse on race, gender, and class identities—engineer algorithms that reflect their perspectives, assumptions, and forms of social organization, which perpetuate racism through "human bias in technical design" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 78). Benjamin (2019) argues that algorithms created by colorblind designs to promote racial diversity efforts perpetuate the things they claim to fight against. She writes, "Algorithmic neutrality reproduces algorithmically sustained discrimination" or technological benevolence (p. 143). Moreover, Benjamin (2019) writes, "…whereas the purpose of identifying an individual's race during the Jim Crow era was to discriminate effectively, now the stated aim is to 'better serve' or 'include' different groups." (p. 147). However, the motives behind these

alleged technical fixes are for profit gain. How user data is collected, particularly for corporate interests and "codified beyond the law, in the digital structures of everyday life," reinforces what Noble (2018) calls technological redlining (Benjamin, 2019, p. 147).

Colorblind technologies, as discussed in the literature, indeed promote predatory inclusion in both expanding and excluding people of color in digital technologies (Cottom, 2020). To expand on this point, predatory inclusion in higher education mirrors predatory housing and credit policies aimed at seemingly increasing access to underrepresented communities while inconspicuously undermining and exacerbating social inequities Taylor (2019). In this study, I argue that the persistent advertising of pre-college programs from top lauded universities and the dearth of advertisements students receive from these same institutions for regular admissions is predatory inclusion in action and contributes to inequities in higher education (Cottom, 2020). All the collaborators in my study are students of color; seven of the eight identify as girls, and all are first-generation and low-income. I argue that analyzing the salient characteristics of pre-college summer and online programs and how students make sense of them is critical to college access and merits further exploration. Students are classified based on data collected from them through platforms and third-party vendors (e.g., College Board, ACT, Niche, etc.) and receive advertisements from post-secondary institutions recruiting them into pre-college programs. At face value, students are not excluded from college admissions; rather, they receive advertisements for pre-college summer and online programs. However, these pre-college programs advertise to students of color from low-income backgrounds without considering their life situations. Equally problematic is that these same programs do not advertise their institution for college admissions with the same intensity.

Taken together, digital technologies mediate and mask the social stratification of college opportunities through academic capitalism. Slaughter et al. (2004) discuss three ways postsecondary institutions have turned students into targets of extraction for tuition revenue: First, through marketing in ways that serve the universities' economic interests; second, through catering recruitment efforts towards a more privileged student market; and third, through promoting consumer capitalism through services conferred rather than the benefit of a formal education (Slaughter et al., 2004).

Methodology

I analyzed 88 advertisements for pre-college summer and online programs, 4% of the total 2,126 ads collected by collaborators. I draw from Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focuses on the dialectical relations between discourse and power and their effects on other social elements (e.g., power relations, institutions, social identities, etc.) (Fairclough, 2013a, 2013b). In using CDA, I examine the relationship between discourse in advertising of pre-college online and summer programs and how it shapes students' perception of college.

Fairclough's three-dimensional analytic framework includes spoken or written language text, the discourse practices that involve the processes of text production, interpretation, and consumption, and social practice as discourse rooted in ideology and power (Fairclough, 2013a; Noble, 2012). In my CDA analysis, the text represent the image and video advertisements for pre-college programs received and collected by collaborators. The analysis of the discourse practice represents the process by which digital advertisements served to students are produced,

received, and consumed by collaborators. Lastly, in the analysis of social practice, I situate the scholarship in academic capitalism and the rise of pre-college programs to discuss the role that discourse around these programs have on influencing students' perceptions of college. In analyzing pláticas and advertisements for pre-college programs, I developed codes inductively through an open coding approach (Miles et al., 2013). In my first cycle of coding advertisements, I applied an open coding approach using both In Vivo and descriptive codes to capture verbatim text used in advertisements and descriptors in ads (e.g., "Explore your…") to gauge how colleges and universities use language to communicate to prospective students. I then transitioned to open coding of the advertisement, paying particular attention to the saliency of certain elements within the advertisements (e.g., mention of benefits, image of a student of color, etc.) Below, I discuss my findings.

Findings

Description of pre-college ads: "Explore your intellectual passions"

Advertisements for pre-college online and summer programs enact similar formats and structures. Of the 88 advertisements for pre-college and summer programs, all had at minimum three elements: a program title, an image, and a call to action (see Table 4.1). For example, an advertisement collected by Ximena in Figure 4.1 shows these three elements: the program title, "Rice University Precollege Program," an image of a campus building, presumably of Rice University, and a button icon to "Learn More." Other elements in the advertisements for pre-college programs include language promoting the program and benefits such as "Jumpstart your educational experience." About 67% (60) of advertisements included promotional language

around the benefits of participating in the program (see Figure 4.2). Advertisements that included information about the audience or who these advertisements were geared towards included about 38% (34). These ads, for example, mentioned “13 to 18 year old”, “high school students,” etc. This is interesting because only a third of these advertisements clearly communicated their target audience, something I discuss in more detail below. 11% (10) of ads provided more context and information about program elements and structure, such as types of courses offered, and duration of the program. Only 9% (8) ads included information about material benefits to the program, including earning a certificate or college credit. None of the ads provided information about cost, which is important because all programs charged a minimum of $1000. A couple mentioned receiving a discount (e.g., an email ad Yatziri received for NYLF - Medicine), but none mentioned free of cost, applying for scholarships, or cost estimate.

Table 4.1

Descriptive Table of Pre-College Program Ads (Total Ads = 88)

Pre-College/Summer Program (N=16)	Amíra	María	Sally	Ximena*	Yatziri
Boston Summer Journalism Academy				1	
Brandeis Pre-College Program	1		2	1	
Brown Pre-College Program	1	1	1		
Case Western Reserve University Pre-College	7		2	1	
DigiPen Pre-College Program				1	
Earlham College Summer Program	1				
Georgetown University Pre-College Program	12		2	1	5
National Youth Leadership Forum					2
Rice University Pre-College Program	8		1	2	
Stanford Daily	2		3		
Stanford Pre-College Summer Institute		1	2		
University of Cambridge Pre-University Summer Program	2		4		
University of Rochester Pre-College Program	5	1	3	3	
USC Pre-College Program			1	1	
Wake Forest Pre-College Program			2		
William & Mary Pre-College Program			3	2	

**Note*. Numbers represent the count of ads received by student for each program.

Figure 4.1

Advertisement Ximena received from Rice University Pre-College Program

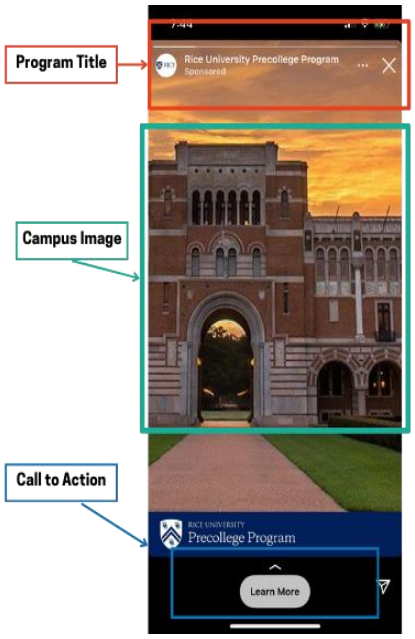
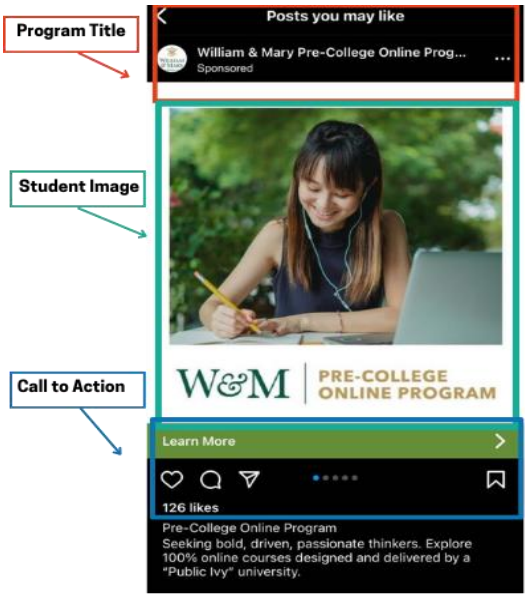


Figure 4.2

Advertisement Sally received from Wake Forest University's Pre-College Program



Text analysis: Video ad from Georgetown University

In early February 2023, Amíra was applying to summer programs that Ms. Rendon recommended. All of the summer programs Ms. Rendon recommended were in-state and free or at a reduced cost to students from low-income backgrounds. On February 22, 2023 Amíra screen recorded a video of an Instagram advertisement from Georgetown University's pre-college online program on her iPhone. The 14-second advertisement begins with what appears to be a Black woman with brown skin and sleek black hair adjusting clear goggles and wearing a white lab coat as she stares at the camera lens. This is the first of 12 images displayed in the 14-second-long video. In the following, I briefly describe some of the images, text, and audio from the advertisement (see Appendix A for complete transcription).

In the entire clip there are a total of five people for which we can visibly see their faces– what appear to be two Black women, a Black man, and two white men. All are performing different tasks. For example, in the first scene, a Black woman with brown skin and sleek hair parted on the right side wearing a white lab coat is staring at the camera as she adjusts her white goggles. The embroidered lettering on her coat says "MedStar [U]niversity" on her right side, and "Medic…" is legible on her left side. We might surmise from the white coat, clear goggles, and embroidery that the woman is a doctor or medical researcher/scientist. In the following scenes, others are dressed in professional attire, suit or button-up shirt– performing different tasks– writing on a notepad, twirling a device, writing on the whiteboard, or speaking to the camera. The indexicals from these images convey that these people are institutional agents or portrayed as such– a medical professional, detective, professor. There is one scenic view of what appears to be a college campus, Georgetown, presumably because the text "From Georgetown University" appears on the screen. This positioning and highlighting of college campuses is

prevalent in college recruiting (Zhang et al., 2022), however, what makes this image striking is the fact that this program is entirely online, and students will not enjoy the benefits of attending Georgetown University in person.

The entire transcript of the text appearing on the screen is “Online courses for high school students”, “From Georgetown University,” “Explore inspiring careers before you go to college,” and “Apply Now!” The font and banner for the text appearing on the screen are all the same: navy blue banner, letters in white, all caps font.

The audio begins with a man’s voice. We later see a Black man with brown skin and facial hair speaking. As he begins talking, neutral music plays in the background. He says, “Being delivered exceptional content from one of the best institutions in the world.” Six seconds into the video the tempo of the background music increases and the man with tan skin wearing a suit and tie begins talking. He says, “You don’t have to have any pre-knowledge; all we ask that you bring to the table is curiosity, interest, and passion.” The rise in tempo in background music and enthusiasm from the man with a suit and tie create a sense of excitement and urgency for the viewer to click the button to “Learn More”.

Through this text analysis of the video ad Amíra received for Georgetown University’s Pre-college program, I highlight different elements of promotional tactics, including representing diversity through the people displayed in the video, the campus aesthetics of Georgetown University, and language conveying prestige through the use of language like “one of the best institutions in the world.”

Discourse Practice

The video is an advertisement and, as such, scripted and produced with the purpose to get students to apply for this pre-college program. Embedded in these ads' text, audio, and images are important indexicals to discourse practice in how collaborators interpret and consume these pre-college program ads. Amíra received 12 advertisements from Georgetown University's pre-college online and summer programs out of the total 39 ads she received for these programs. Other collaborators, including Yatziri and Sally, also received advertisements for Georgetown University's pre-college program. The circulation of these advertisements spanned social media (Instagram), email, and direct mail. While not the scope of this analysis, as I discuss in the beginning vignette, Vivian received an invitation for the National Youth Leadership Forum (NYLF) in medicine in the mail. María and her mom had both shared that they, too, received an invitation in the mail for a National Youth Leadership Forum.

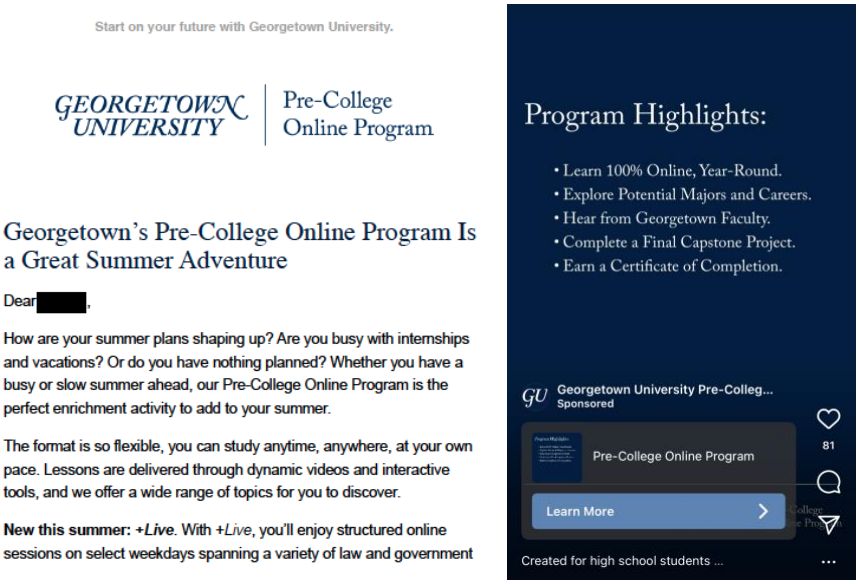
Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show an email received by Yatziri on June 6, 2023 for Georgetown's Pre-college program and an Instagram advertisement received by Sally on May 19, 2023 for the same program.

Figure 4.3

Email ad from Georgetown's Pre-College Program

Figure 4.4

Instagram ad from Georgetown's Pre-College Program



Several elements of marketing discourse stand out in the video advertisement received by Amíra. The self-promotion of Georgetown as "one of the best institutions in the world" are elements from the genre of prestige or commodity advertising (Fairclough, 2013b). Interestingly, "You don't have to have any pre-knowledge, all we ask…is curiosity, interest, and passion" conflicts with the elements of prestige and exclusivity of a competitive elite institution. This suggests these programs are advertising to a broader audience than what they might be advertising for admissions into their institution. At the same time, personal qualities (e.g., "curiosity, interest, and passion") and elements of personalization are used (e.g. "You don't", "we ask") in the video to add to the interdiscursive mix of advertising and conversational genres (Fairclough, 2013b). In the video, email, and Instagram ads, we see elements highlighting the benefits of this program to the student. In the title of the email from Figure 4.3, the words "Great Summer Adventure" in bold font are used to describe the program, and in the body of the email, "enrichment activity to add to your summer" is added to hone in this point (Van Leeuwen, 2015).

In the Instagram ad from Figure 4.4, the benefits of the program include, “Explore potential majors and careers”, “Complete a Final Capstone Project”, and “Earn a certificate of completion”. These benefits, different from the email ad, suggest both tangible (e.g., capstone project, certificate) and intangible outcomes (e.g., exploration of majors and careers).

Something present in the video advertisement and other advertisements not included here is language around jump-starting your college journey and getting ahead of the application process by doing things “before you go to college,” or “jump-start your college…”. This language is consistent with my conversations with collaborators who were interested in participating in a summer program. Of the eight, six participated in a summer program. To my knowledge, only Vivian and her parents paid for her summer program out of pocket– others received scholarships or support from the school and district to attend their program. On different occasions collaborators mentioned receiving information and a list of free and low-cost summer programs from Ms. Rendon to apply to. At this point, it is not entirely clear whether the direct messages they received online through digital advertisements further informed their decision to research and apply to summer programs or if the research they did on summer programs because of the information provided by Ms. Rendon triggered targeted social media and search advertisements for such programs, or a mixture of the two. Vivian and María’s, mothers were involved in obtaining more information about letters for these programs. Both Vivian’s mother and María’s mother asked for my opinion about these programs in my first meeting with them, perhaps because they viewed me as an expert and wanted support in interpreting the information from these ads. While neither of them received a formal college education in the U.S. (Vivian’s mother has a law degree from another country), they were

concerned about missing out on an opportunity like this for their daughters. They used their social and navigational capital in asking me for my feedback to guide their decisions (Yosso*, 2005).

Making sense of advertisements

Analyzing the text above inform the discourse practice, that is, how collaborators receive, contemplate, and make sense of these ads. In this section, I focus my analysis on how students make sense of these ads. In several informal and formal pláticas with collaborators, we discussed their thoughts on the advertisements they had received. Amíra specifically had a lot to share about pre-college programs because most ads she received were from these types of programs. Other collaborators, María, Sally, Yatziri, and Vivian, also shared their thoughts with me. Through these informal and formal pláticas about pre-college programs with collaborators over the span of 14 months, four themes emerged from the analysis: confusion about these programs, cost as a deterrent, and skepticism of their value.

Confusion about pre-college programs

As I discuss in Chapter 3, collaborators engaged in collective sensemaking during the group plática. In this group plática, Amíra chimed in after Yatziri shared her experience in applying to the UC and CSU system and her unfamiliarity with the private admissions process, a finding I discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Amíra agrees with Yatziri in that she, too, was intimidated by the common application and private schools and unsure how to apply. “I kind of felt a little like behind,” Amíra shares. Amíra continues,

> And then when, I would see Rice University and then Georgetown, those advertisements for like pre-college. And so it wasn't like "Apply to our school," it was more like "pre-college programs." So I was like, I don't need that. I don't know, it's not that I don't need that. But it was like they didn't interest me just because I didn't even know where they were, they wouldn't say where they were; they just said their university name.

Amíra begins by connecting her experience to Yatziri's feelings of uncertainty and qualms with the private admissions process. She shares that the ads she received for pre-college programs from private institutions led her to believe they were advertising their program and not their school. Here, she distinguishes between advertisements for college applications and advertisements for pre-college programs– the latter of which she primarily received. Amíra interprets the messaging in these advertisements as promotional tactics geared towards a particular program affiliated with a school. This is likely due to the lack of ads she received for admissions at private institutions despite her desire to apply. In the excerpt above, Amíra's read of these particular ads echo social practices of commercialization and commodification in academic capitalism (Slaughter et al., 2004). Furthermore, she adds that the advertisements did not interest her because they did not provide useful information, including the location of the institution (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5

Instagram Ad from Rice University's Pre-College Program

A few weeks after the group plática, I had a one-on-one plática with Amíra and asked her to follow up on what she shared in the group about pre-college programs. In this recorded plática on Zoom, I displayed three advertisements she uploaded to our shared folder. First, I display an ad from Georgetown University and ask Amíra to elaborate on what she shared in the group plática above about receiving ads for pre-college programs and not for admissions. I ask her below,

Patricia: I don't know if you remember in the focus group you mentioned like these pre-college summer programs and you said something to the effect of, "I'm getting ads for these like summer programs, but I'm not getting asked to apply to the school".

Amíra: Yeah.

Patricia: Is that kind of what you're referring to of it's [ad] not saying "Apply to Georgetown" it's [saying] "Apply to this summer program at Georgetown?

Amíra: Yeah that's, that's honestly, when I did start sending you the Georgetown University ads, I would see pre-college and then summer like that, and I'm like, do you just want me to do an online course, you know, that's kind of what I would think. But yeah, I never really, I mean, I could see it as, I could apply there. But it's like, when I see these ads, it's just applying to their summer program, not their school. So it wasn't really like I didn't really keep it in mind when I was doing [my] college apps. It was kind of just in the…it wasn't really in my head.

If the primary goal of these advertisements are to encourage prospective students to apply to these pre-college programs and a secondary goal to encourage applications for enrollment, it did not work for Amíra. To this point, above she says, "I didn't really keep it in mind when I was doing [my] college apps" when referring to her college application process. Seeing words like "pre-college" and "summer" were indicators to Amíra that despite the ad coming from a university, it was not encouraging her to apply for admissions, but rather for a summer or online program. In the group plática, I ask Amíra to share her perceptions of the pre-college programs advertisements she received to which she says,

> When I saw it the pre-college, I don't even know what that means. Like maybe take a course or something. But still, it was like, I don't really have a clue. Like I could search it up. But it was like, I don't I don't know off the off the top of my head. I don't know what pre-college means. Or I don't even know if it's free or do I have to apply or have to do an application?

Amíra understood that applying to this program was not the same as applying to the school. This is important because Amíra expressed a desire to apply to private schools and as I discuss in Chapter 3, she felt she did not receive enough support at school to apply for private school admission. Like other collaborators, most of the ads she received were from private institutions. However, the institutions advertising pre-college programs were not sending Amíra

ads for their school. I argue this equates to predatory inclusion whereby collaborators receiving ads from pre-college programs affiliated with particular institutions are not receiving ads for admissions from these institutions. Moreover, this social practice of exclusion is part and parcel of social stratification in higher education and contributes to academic capitalism (Slaughter et al., 2004). For example, despite the growth in postsecondary enrollment, Latinx students are largely represented in the community college sector (Fry, 2011). Additionally, Black and Latinx students are less likely to enroll in a selective private institution compared to their White peers (Baker et al., 2018).

In my text analysis above, I find many advertisements for pre-college programs provided little to no information about the program, including the structure, courses offered, duration, cost, or benefits. Amíra echos this finding because she did not know what pre-college programs meant, requiring her to "search it up" in order to understand better the advertisements she was receiving. Additionally, she says it was unclear whether these programs were free and if she had to apply to them. After Amíra is done sharing her perspective on pre-college programs during the group plática, Yatziri shares a similar sentiment, she says.

> Kind of how [Amíra] said, it was like, confusing to me. I didn't understand what it meant, Oh, is it [pre-college program] gonna cost me money? Or do I have to, go there physically, is it online? And for me, personally, most of the programs that they're offering I wasn't really just interested in and also, I already had a lot going on with my, my job and extracurricular activities. So I felt like that adding to that would have been more on my plate. And I chose to instead just focus on the classes I have, and the things

I'm involved in. So I just kind of just set those aside. But I didn't really, I didn't choose to look into those.

Like Amíra, Yatziri felt confused by the advertisements she was receiving for pre-college programs. She did not know if she had to pay to participate in these programs or whether the programs were offered in person or online. Ultimately, Yatziri felt that she was already juggling a lot with her part-time job at a fast food restaurant and her extracurricular activities. She opted to focus on her classes and the things she was already involved in. These comments by Amíra and Yatziri signal their skepticism of these programs in the lack of information provided and the value added in participating. Furthermore, the opacity of these pre-college programs made them uninteresting for Amíra. She says, "I felt since the ad wasn't showing much about it. And much interest in me like I didn't really show much interest in it. Seeing where it's just like, "Learn more". Like, no, tell me what it is, you know…" She adds her skepticism only grew because she had never heard of these universities before. "Since I've never heard of what these universities… I was like what if I'm about to get hacked? I press this link and like, I don't know, but it could be my own skepticism." This made her feel like she did not have to look into these programs. She says, "I've never heard of the universities or what a pre-college program is. I was like maybe it's not necessary or like I don't have to do this." Moreover, the lack of clear information about these programs felt untrustworthy to Amíra. Amíra questioned if clicking on a link would compromise her information and she would get hacked. Having no awareness of these institutions confirmed that this was not necessary for college admissions and so despite the frequency of advertisements Amíra was receiving for pre-college programs, the obscurity of these programs and amount of ads she was receiving made her feel like these programs were not seriously interested in her

when she says, “I felt like since the ad wasn’t showing much about it. And like much interest in me, I didn’t really show much interest in it.”

Pre-college programs and cost: “Not even…considering it”

The cost of pre-college programs was a big dissuading factor for collaborators. In a one-on-one plática with María in mid-February 2024, as I shared one of the ads she received from Brown, she says the following:

Patricia: Because, I noticed that a lot of students were getting ads for pre-college programs around this time last year [Spring 2023], like have it so that they could apply to their summer programs. Did you ever look into any of them [pre-college programs]?

María: I did. And I found out their pre-college programs, except UC Santa Barbara, they cost like 1000s of dollars. So to me, it was like totally, “Oh, not even thinking like considering it at all.”

Patricia: Yeah. You said except for Santa Barbara.

María: Yes, Santa Barbara, I think they had free college program, pre-college, but a lot like Brown, USC, they cost $1,000s

For María, paying for a pre-college program that cost thousands of dollars was not worth it. She mentions finding a free pre-college program hosted by UC Santa Barbara and others like Brown and USC, charging thousands for theirs. Knowing that María had an interest in law and history, in the conversation below, I ask her if receiving an ad for a pre-college program for one of these disciplines would have interested her. In our conversation below, she shares her thoughts.

Patricia: That makes sense. What if you had received an ad for a pre-college program in law or history? Is that something you would have looked into?

María: I would have totally, I would have been super interested in it. Because I will do a career path in it.

Patricia: What if, because I know you mentioned a lot of these programs costs a lot of money, would you have still considered it or..?

María: …mmm no.

Patricia: [both laugh]. You're like "Uh…"

María: No, I would not.

Patricia: Yeah, yeah, no, that makes sense…

María: It doesn't seem like it will benefit me that much to be paying that much.

Patricia: Right. Why do you say that? Like, why do you think it wouldn't…

María: Because I feel a lot of people can still get accepted to the colleges they want to go to, even without the program. And I feel the information, teaching in those programs, you could Google it, or YouTube…Because it feels like the programs you have to pay for and the prices are so high it seems unattainable to people who are from underrepresented communities.

For María even a program geared towards her interests in law or history was not worth paying $1000s of dollars for. She says, "It doesn't seem like it will benefit me that much to be paying that much." When I ask her to explain what she means by this, she says she believes people can get accepted into college without participating in these types of programs and even says the information taught in these programs can be learned on Google or YouTube. María also believes programs with such large price tags are not accessible to underrepresented communities. The same observation María had about the cost of these programs is something Ximena shared in an earlier plática.

Like Sally, Sage, and Amíra, Ximena participated in a summer program at a public research institution. When discussing some of the advertisements Ximena was receiving for summer programs in the Spring of her junior year, I asked if she considered applying to any of them. She shares the following,

Yeah, a lot of them did [make me consider]. But the thing is when I would open them right away, it's like "This month for tuition is only $2000 this" and I was like, I didn't even consider it. I'm like, I'm not gonna get like, I feel if I asked my parents, I think they would have given me because for the [different summer program] one. They were like, "You know, if you want the $3000, we can find a way," but I don't know. Like, I just never been the type to ask especially for $3000. Like, I don't know, I was like [to my parents], "No, don't worry about it."

Despite her interest in participating in a summer program and support from her parents in figuring out a way to pay for a summer program, Ximena felt that paying $2000-$3000 was too much money and not something she would ask her parents to pay for. The issue of cost was also something Sally and I discussed in a separate plática. In a plática with Sally, I showed her an ad for Wake Forest University's pre-college program. Below she shares her thoughts about these programs.

Patricia:	What about other ones similar to this like that are advertising summer pre-college programs like I know I mentioned Georgetown, Rochester, Rice. Did you ever look into those?
Sally:	Um, I think I looked into one of them I don't remember what school it was but I looked into it because I think it was fully online.
Patricia:	And is that something you were interested in?
Sally:	Um, no, no, I was just curious about it. And I think they also offered like they had advertised that they offer college credit for the courses.
Patricia:	Is that something so like, would you consider an online summer program? If you're getting college credit?
Sally:	Yeah.
Patricia:	What if it cost money.
Sally:	[pauses for two seconds] Mmm no.

Patricia: What if you had to apply for like a scholarship so that you can do it for free?

Sally: If I knew I had a high chance of my tuition of being covered then yeah.

Sally, like María and Ximena, was not willing to pay for a pre-college summer program. She was not interested in a fully online program costing thousands of dollars. However, after probing, she shares that she would have considered an online summer program if there was an opportunity to earn college credit and if she had a good chance of getting it paid for. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Sally participated in a rigorous summer research program and received a full scholarship to cover the expenses and therefore costly pre-college programs did not catch her attention. María, Ximena, and Sally allude to the pay-to-play messaging they received for pre-college programs in having to pay an exorbitant amount to participate in these summer program experiences. María specifically, felt that these programs would not improve her chances for college admissions and was critical of their value given their high cost and online modality. This perspective aligns with academic capitalism where the market-driven nature of higher education often prioritizes profit over access and equity. The high cost of these pre-college programs reflects the commercialization of college access, reinforcing the pay-to-play model in which wealthier students, or those able to afford such programs, gain advantages in the college admissions process.

Summer programs focused on "fun" activities, not academics

Having participated in a summer program, Sally's perspective on summer programs was that they are challenging and intended to prepare you for the transition to college. Showing Sally

the advertisement for Wake Forest University, I ask if she recalls receiving ads for programs like this. She says,

> I do. But I um I thought it was interesting that they were doing like a summer program I'm like, I think one of them [ads] was fashion right? I wouldn't think of attending a summer program for something like that. Like I think of summer programs to be academic and not like treats or stuff like that. I don't know.

In the plática with Sally wasn't interested in online program and programs focused on "fashion," she wanted something more academic, not "treats". This sentiment was also shared by Amíra. In a plática with Amíra after showing her an ad for Georgetown University's pre-college program, I ask her "So I feel like this is an ad you got a lot. What are your thoughts like when you see this ad or just receiving ads similar to this school or this program?" She responds,

> At first glance, I kind of just see "Summer application now open" and then like the "pre-college online program". And in my opinion, I don't know, it kind of feels like a summer program like it feels kind of like for fun, or I don't know, kind of how I did it. Maybe because I have experience with a summer program. And then also the caption where it's like, "Explore your intellectual passions before" and then like, "blank, blank, blank". I kind of like it doesn't really tell me anything about Georgetown. I don't even know where Georgetown is. I don't know; I've never heard of it before. Before I had seen these ads. And so another fact that is online kind of did stray me away though, because I'm like, I don't know. Maybe I won't experience that college, I don't know, level experience, but it doesn't seem like a college ad but it doesn't really seem like too serious. It's kind of just like for fun. I don't know.

Both Sally and Amíra participated in a summer research program and received scholarships to cover the expenses. They both talked about how challenging it was for them and how much of a culture shock they experienced. Similarly, both shared that they perceived summer programs to be rigorous and academically challenging, not an enrichment activity like the language some of these ads used. Amíra brings up being strayed away from many of these ads for online pre-college programs because she would not be able to get the college experience. Amíra, Sally, María, and Ximena share the disconnect between the advertisements they received for pre-college programs and the relevance to their lives. This skepticism can be related to what Martinez et al. (2020) finds in that underrepresented students expect college to be challenging, thus collaborators view enrichment activities as not adequate to prepare them for college. The language promoting enrichment activities suggests that the likely target of these pre-college summer programs are not first-generation, low-income, students of color. For example, studies have found students from more privileged racial and socioeconomic positions partake in extracurricular activities far more often that underrepresented communities to maintain an advantage in college admissions (Jayakumar & Page, 2021; Park et al., 2023). These extracurricular activities often require financial investments, thus exacerbating social stratification through a 'pay-to-play' approach (Park et al., 2023, p. 47).

This, disconnect of the messaging for these programs, however, was not felt by everyone. Vivian, as I discussed in the beginning, participated in a summer program catered to students in medicine. In the second recorded plática, I ask Vivian to reflect on her experience with the summer program she participated in. In reflecting, she shares that she enjoyed her experience in

the program and got to meet a lot of students from different walks of life. In response to my question, Vivian says,

> I had never heard the program before. So when I received it [letter in the mail], I logged into my computer. I was like, "Okay, what is this about?" But it also, I guess they kind of did play on me. Well they didn't play on me. But they did play to my kind of emotions because, I don't know about other classmates of mine. But it was the first time that a letter was addressed to me in such a formal way. And then, I mean, it was related to medicine. So it, it appealed to me. And something I wanted to do. And I was looking at programs, and I was gonna apply to [other summer program]. But it was I can, yeah, it's gonna cost money, but it's actually about medicine. It's very oriented to the medical field. Whereas [other summer program], yeah, I get research experience, but it's not specifically medically oriented. And my dad was like, "If I'm going to…, if you're going to pursue medicine, and I'm going to help you pay for that. I rather spend 5k right now, so that you can get a feel of it and tell me if you actually like it, rather than spend 20k. And then you tell me 'I'm switching my major.'" You know, so that's because that's also why I did it. Because at [other summer program], I wasn't going to go to something medical field, I was going to do research. Research I'm going to do anyways. Because if I, for some strange reason, if I decided I don't want to be a doctor of medicine, I'm probably still gonna go get a PhD.

The letter Vivian received in the mail for NYLF felt different because it was addressed to her and written in a formal manner. What stood out to her was that this program focused on medicine, whereas other summer programs Ms. Rendon recommended were broad and more

research-oriented. Despite the sacrifice her parents made, her dad felt it was worth paying $5k to give Vivian the opportunity to explore if medicine was truly something she was interested in. She justified her decision in her understanding that she could always pursue a Ph.D. in the future if a medical degree is something she no longer aspired to. This summer program, while being expensive, felt like the right decision for Vivian and her parents.

In my first recorded plática with Vivian, she shared a story of how she played doctor with her parents as a child and the inside joke that sparked her interest in pursuing medicine. She shared her story with me, "And then they started a joke, cuz at my dad's work, he broke one of his teeth. So I was like, 'Dad I'm going to be a doctor, I'm going to be a dentist so I can fix your teeth.'" As Vivian grew older, her interest in medicine continued to grow as she became her grandfather's language broker and caretaker, accompanying him during doctor appointments and caring for him after school and on weekends so her mother and grandmother could work in the fields. This experience only further solidified their bond. I was meeting with Vivian in her home one early September day when her grandfather's health took a turn. Days later, he passed away. Vivian was devastated to lose her grandfather, who was a father figure after her parents separated, and someone with whom she shared a deep connection. Her desire to pursue medicine and increase access to health care for immigrant communities grew from witnessing the physical and emotional toll of harsh farm working conditions and the financial and medical negligence her grandfather, mother, and grandmother experienced. Vivian shared that going with her grandfather to his appointments with different specialists allowed her to gain exposure in being able to ask his doctors questions about his health and at times, personal questions about their

journey in medical school. The NYLF was an opportunity to further explore her interests, and hence the reason why she was inclined to participate in it.

While Vivian enjoyed her experience in the program, she mentioned some downsides, such as the length of the program, which was only nine days, and having to create and perform a drama, which she felt took away from other activities, including working on her sutures or practicing other skills. Vivian's experience and perception of this pre-college program was different from Amíra, Yatziri, María, and Sally's for a couple of reasons. First, the invitation she received in the mail for this program was addressed to her and tailored to her interest in medicine. This was different from the pre-college program advertisements collaborators received lacking important information and a personalized touch. Second, this program was in person and hosted a driving distance away in Los Angeles, where her father lives. All of these factors contributed to her and her parent's decision to make the sacrifice and consider payment options for this program.

Social Practice

Digital advertisements high school students receive about pre-college online and summer programs are woven into the marketization of higher education and specifically take on what Slaughter et al. (2004) refer to as academic capitalism. Kim (2019) writes about the business of pre-college programs in exposing students to college by giving them a head start. Parents and students eager to get a leg up in college admissions enroll in these programs. Kim (2019) writes, "These programs can offer precocious teens an enriching, hands-on preview of college life. But they also exploit both the allure of brand-name universities and families' anxieties about an increasingly cutthroat college admissions process in which 'summer experiences' matter."

Typically, the targeted audience for these programs is upper-middle-class families with disposable income, but these programs clearly have a market for lower-income families by offering 'fundraising guides' for students and families (Kim, 2019). Unfortunately, for families with lower incomes, these summer programs do not seem to improve their child's chances of admission into these elite institutions. Kim states, "But college admissions experts say that for many families, these experiences aren't worth the often very hefty price tags. Harvard's two-week session costs $4,600, while Brown charges $2,776 for one week and $6,976 for a four-week version." Admissions officers interviewed by Kim report that these programs do not reflect the academic rigor or selectivity of the institutions that host them and, in fact, are often run by private, for-profit companies who sometimes hire faculty from the host institution to teach some classes, but are not in any way affiliated with the admissions process specifically or the institution broadly (Kim, 2019).

The profit imperatives of diversifying an institution's revenue stream and contracting with third party vendors to host these summer programs are critical elements of academic capitalism (Kim, 2019; Slaughter et al., 2004). For example, out of the 15 institutions that advertised their pre-college programs, a third were run by Kaplan Inc. a business-to-business (B2B) education company. A large portion of the advertisements students receive for pre-college programs are offered online. While there has been a shift in the instruction and implementation of these programs to online learning, the cost appears to remain relatively high. For Georgetown's pre-college online program, students have the option to choose from 1-week, 2-week, or 4-week intensive sessions for $1,495. For a two-week residential pre-college summer

program at Brown, students pay $4, 987 and pay $3,028 for a 2-week online pre-college program (Brown Pre-College Programs, n.d.) (see Appendix B).

A large motive behind these programs is profit. Students who traditionally wouldn't get accepted to these elite institutions are getting targeted for these summer and online pre-college programs. Kim writes, "As tightly as the gates are shut for undergraduate admissions, they are flung wide open during summer" (Kim, 2019). For example, Amíra was cognizant that the ads she received from Georgetown and Rice for pre-college programs were centered around a particular program and not encouraging her to apply for admissions. These programs have large implications for students from underrepresented backgrounds who are predatorially targeted by these programs that use elements of prestige and commodity advertising to entice students to enroll. Despite the promotional tactics employed by pre-college programs, I find collaborators largely were able to see through the facade of these programs in questioning their utility and value added. Because collaborators had institutional agents like Ms. Rendon provide them with a list of rigorous, free, California-based summer programs, the ads they received from pre-college programs had a modest influence on their consideration of such programs.

Conclusion

On separate occasions, collaborators discussed advertisements they received for pre-college programs. This was especially important for Vivian's and Maria's mom, who both asked me for advice during my first meeting with them. Through a critical discourse analysis, I find advertisements for pre-college programs lack information relevant to students. This was something corroborated by Amíra and Yatziri, who felt wary of these programs. As collaborators

became more curious and looked into them, they uncovered their high price tags, further deterring them from considering applying. These findings speak to the lack of transparency of these programs, which are problematic for underrepresented students seeking summer college opportunities.

In conclusion, pre-college programs, particularly those marketed as "enrichment activities," serve as a compelling example of academic capitalism in action. These programs often convey benevolent messages about leveling the playing field and providing opportunities for students to enhance their college prospects. However, the high cost of participation in many of these programs reveals a "pay-to-play" dynamic, where access to these purported benefits is gated by one's ability to afford them (Park et al., 2023). While the marketing of these programs emphasizes inclusivity and the promise of increased access to college, the underlying economic model reinforces inequality by catering more effectively to wealthier students, for whom these programs are a more accessible form of "enrichment." These programs are distinct from traditional programs like Upward Bound, which aim to support low-income, first-generation students with college access without the heavy financial burden. In contrast, the marketing tactics used for pre-college programs often prioritize appealing visual content and convenience over informative, substantive details that would be more meaningful to the students they purport to serve. This reflects a broader trend in academic capitalism, where institutions partner with private companies to generate revenue, passing these costs onto students while promoting a narrative of inclusivity that does not always align with the lived realities of underrepresented students (Slaughter et al., 2004). By emphasizing speed of service and convenience of access, these programs are more likely to resonate with affluent students who have the resources to

navigate such commodified systems, further entrenching the socioeconomic disparities in higher education access (Slaughter et al., 2004).

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

In this chapter, I summarize the key findings from Chapters 2, 3, and 4. I begin by highlighting the contributions to the literature on college access and enrollment management. Next, I explore the theoretical and methodological contributions made through this research. I then examine the implications of these findings for institutions, policy makers, students, and schools. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future research in this area.

Chapter 2: Navigating the Digital Landscape: How High School Students Structure Their College Search and Engage with Online Content

Chapter 2 addresses the first research question: How do high school students in the San Joaquin Valley interact with and respond to digital technologies and advertisements during the college application process? In this chapter, I analyze 14 months of fieldnotes and informal and recorded pláticas with collaborators as they shared how they structured their college search and application process. With the exception of a few studies examining how students gather information about college (Shamsuddin, 2024) and financial aid (Venegas, 2006) online, there is limited research on how students navigate and structure their online search and application processes across various digital platforms and mediums.

Chapter 2 draws from the college-*conocimiento* framework to situate how Latinx students undergo a dynamic process of college search informed by the seven pathways of *conocimiento* or epistemological development (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). College-*conocimiento* acknowledges the nuanced pathways Latinx students undergo motivated by Perna's (2006) integrated model of

college choice and Anzaldúa's (2002) theory of *conocimiento*. The seven spaces of college-*conocimiento* allow students to reflect on the college information they obtain as they traverse and negotiate the serpentine college pathway (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). This framework focuses on the college-going process of Latinx students, but I argue it can also offer valuable insights into the experiences of students of color from underrepresented backgrounds, such as Sage, who navigates a nonlinear pathway to college. Sage's experience navigating the college choice process as a child of a Vietnamese immigrant single mother differed from other collaborators, and yet the college-*conocimiento* framework helps frame the constantly evolving process students grapple with in making college decisions (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Relevant to this study, I argue that collaborators grapple with a digital *nepantla* space of information-gathering not discussed about in the literature. In this context, the digital realm intersects with the social dimensions of college choice in concrete ways—such as when college information received online directly influences application decisions.

Through a qualitative analysis of two recorded pláticas with each collaborator (a total of 16), one group plática, and 14 months of fieldnotes, I find collaborators use their phones primarily for college research through both Google searches and social media. Given that Safari and Google Search are the default browser and search engine on iPhones, this is particularly concerning in light of existing research on search engines and the recent lawsuit challenging Google's monopoly (McCabe, 2024). Using phones also encourages cursory information gathering, which can be problematic because searches often steer the information students receive, shaping the content they continue to seek—thereby creating feedback loops that reinforce certain types of information (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). While collaborators were

largely skeptical of advertisements from social media and email, they were less skeptical about Google search results, often quoting information from Google as more credible. Collaborators structured their searches using different approaches, including using Google's featured snippets, searching for college rankings websites, and searching for college websites. This is important because the ways collaborators search for college information dictates the type of information they receive. For example, answers to a question will look different if it comes from a featured snippet rather than directly from a college website. In addition to using Google, collaborators also leverage social media, manipulating algorithms to curate content that aligns with their preferences. Finally, collaborators share various methods they use to assess the credibility of online information. These include consulting websites with .org or .edu domains, cross-referencing information across multiple sources, reading comments and reviews on social media, and accessing information directly from university websites. The findings from Chapter 2 shed light on how students organize their college search and the devices and platforms they use to gather college-related information. These insights are crucial for understanding how students interact with online content and make sense of it—a process that I explore further in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Decoding Digital Ads: How High School Students Make Sense of Online College Advertising

Drawing from the *college-conocimiento* framework and what I refer to as digital *nepantla*, Chapter 3 addresses the second research question: How do students interpret and make meaning of the advertisements they encounter on digital platforms? This chapter expands upon the findings from Chapter 2 regarding how students structure their online college search and interact with digital technologies and platforms. It draws from 14 months of fieldnotes, along

with informal and recorded *pláticas* with collaborators, primarily conducted during the summer and fall of their senior year, both during and after the college application season.

Further elaborating on the concept of digital *nepantla*, I find that collaborators navigate a complex landscape of diverse and often conflicting sources of information. During their college search and application phase, collaborators receive support from Ms. Rendon, their site coordinator, in addition to some who mentioned receiving college application support from their counselor or teacher. Similarly, all but one collaborator discuss the role of their parents in providing emotional support and encouragement despite all being first-generation. I find evidence that parents played a huge role in seeking support and resources from family, friends, and institutional agents in helping their children apply to college (Ceja, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Amíra's father attended an after school program to learn more about the college application process in order to better inform himself and offer guidance to his daughters. Vivian's mother was heavily invested in making sure her daughter received the best support in applying to college despite not having a formal degree in the US. María's mother and father read and provided feedback on María's personal statement. In my meetings with collaborators and their parents, they all shared a deep interest in their children going to college. This, however, was not the case for everyone. Sage has a complicated relationship with her mother and expressed to me on several occasion her mother's lack of support and interest in her academic achievements. In addition to their parents, I found that social networks played a crucial role for my collaborators in seeking support from extended family, family friends, teachers, and peers. Despite this strong support system, all collaborators turned to digital technologies for their college search and application process. As María explained, Ms. Rendon was often difficult to

reach, so for quick, in-the-moment questions, collaborators relied heavily on Google search and social media, particularly TikTok and Instagram.

Findings from this chapter focus on how students make sense of digital advertisements they received and how this information informed their college search and application decisions, research question 3. Building on the findings from Chapter 2, collaborators describe the iterative nature of their college information-gathering process. For instance, Andrés and Vivian explain how they begin by searching for information on Google, engage with related content on TikTok, and then receive targeted advertisements based on their online activity. This cycle repeats itself, with the content they engage with shaping and refining the information they continue to receive. I conceptualize these feedback loops as digital *nepantla*, where collaborators return to the college search process repeatedly, using it as a means to gather more information from digital online platforms and sources. All collaborators discussed the vast amount of emails they received from institutions. Many mention putting them in their junk folder or ignoring them altogether. A second finding in this chapter focused on the private and out-of-school ads students received. All but three students had an interest in applying to private schools and only one student, Vivian applied to out-of-state and ivy league institutions. Despite the level of ads students received for private institutions, dearth of ads students received from UC and CSU institutions was palpable. This finding is relevant and critical to college access for California students, particularly for students from the San Joaquin Valley who despite aspiring to attend a UC are limited in their proximity to four-year institutions (Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman, 2016). Additionally, the overwhelming number of ads from private and out-of-state institutions further contributes to their confusion.

Results also suggest that digital ads and content increased students' awareness and exposure of different type of institutions. Even if students were not interested in applying to private or out-of-state schools, it expanded their awareness of other options. When it comes to social media, students prefer college information that resonates with their cultural values, particularly content that reflects youth culture. They prefer engaging with content created by peers who are closer in age and have recently navigated the college admissions process. This perspective provides them with a more transparent and unfiltered view of what college life is really like. Although not a substitute for an in-person campus visit, seeing content created by other students helps collaborators envision themselves on these campuses and gain a more authentic perspective. Content from student content creators make "college look cool" and more attainable for collaborators especially María who at this point had never visited a college campus. On the flip side, I find negative social media content shared by students, was a turning point for some collaborators in their consideration of particular schools. For example, videos that Sally, Vivian, and María saw pointing out negative experiences of students played a role in their decision not to apply to some institutions. As I discuss further in the implications for colleges and universities, I caution against using students solely as tools to promote content that prioritizes profit over genuine connection with prospective students. In this regard, a blog post on the EAB website suggests that institutions leverage the potential of influencers. As Kerman (2024) writes:

> Build an arsenal of influencers who can promote your institution to prospective students. 'Micro-influencers' – those who have between 1,000-10,000 followers– will not only be

more affordable but will also have more passionate followers who are more likely to act. You might even find influencers among your current students!

This approach risks commodifying student voices rather than fostering authentic engagement with the college experience.

Chapter 4: Bait and switch: Unpacking pre-college programs in the college search process

Drawing on scholarship in higher education marketing and academic capitalism, Chapter 4 examines how students make sense of pre-college programs advertisements. This chapter is grounded in the frameworks of classification situations (Fourcade & Healy, 2013) and predatory inclusion (Cottom, 2020), through which I explore the intersection of algorithms and social practices embedded in advertisements for these programs.

Through a critical discourse analysis of 88 pre-college program ads and a qualitative analysis of pláticas with collaborators, I find ads for pre-college programs include surface-level elements: a program title, an image, and a call to action. Information about location, cost, program structure, or other pertinent details are lacking in these advertisements. The text analysis is complemented by pláticas with collaborators, in which they share their interpretation of these advertisements. Collaborators explain that these ads are confusing, primarily because they lack sufficient information, prompting students to search for more details. This finding aligns with the obfuscation of information discussed by Cottom (2020) and the tendency to prioritize making ads more appealing than informative, as noted by Slaughter et al. (2004). Another finding, speaks to collaborators' unwilling to participate in these programs, citing the cost as a contributing factor. Additionally, after receiving a list of free, California-based summer programs from

Ms. Rendon, collaborators expressed greater trust in these opportunities. They also note that, since many of these programs are hosted online, they believe they could likely access similar content for free on platforms like YouTube. Lastly, collaborators view these programs as enjoyable activities, which they see as contradictory to their expectations of college. As first-generation students, they want programs that offer a genuine college experience and support their transition to higher education, rather than simply providing enrichment activities.

Although collaborators received ads for these pre-college programs, the language used—promoting costly extracurricular activities—suggests that they were likely not the primary target audience for these ads. This finding aligns with Slaughter et al. (2004)'s discussion on the shifting priorities of recruiting and appealing to more affluent prospective students. Additionally, while relatively costly, most of these pre-college programs are short-term and conducted online. Investigating where the overhead and administrative costs of these programs are allocated should be a priority for future research.

In my analysis of these pre-college programs, I found that one-third of the schools that students received ads from are partnered with Kaplan Inc., a global educational services company that offers a wide range of services to colleges and universities, including learning solutions (Kaplan Inc., n.d.). This business-to-business (B2B) partnership aligns with the observations of Slaughter et al. (2004), who notes the growing trend of colleges and universities outsourcing critical functions to external entities. Such partnerships, while often aimed at enhancing institutional offerings, can also raise concerns about the commercialization of education and the prioritization of profit over student outcomes (Slaughter et al., 2004). In discussing the target audience for these programs, Kim (2019) highlights that many of them,

despite their high costs, offer fundraising opportunities. After reviewing the FAQ sections of each program, I found that 13 (86%) explicitly mention providing a limited number of scholarships for students in need.

According to Cottom (2020), predatory inclusion refers to the practice of deliberately incorporating marginalized consumers into seemingly transformative opportunities, but on exploitative terms. While one might assume that all students receive ads for these pre-college programs, the promotional language framing them as enrichment activities—combined with the obfuscation of key details and their rising costs—suggests that, despite targeting a broad audience, these programs are primarily intended for wealthier students.

The findings across the three empirical chapters highlight the intersection of technology and the social dimensions of college access. I discover that the college choice process is increasingly mediated by technology, with collaborators continuously navigating *nepantla* throughout their application journey. They actively search for and gather information online to guide their decisions. From a college access perspective, it is crucial to understand how young people engage with digital technologies and platforms, particularly as students without sufficient resources or support in schools increasingly rely on online information. Media studies have shown that our behavioral data is collected and used to personalize the content we encounter, often creating echo chambers or feedback loops of information (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). Similarly, the content students engage with shapes the subsequent information they receive, perpetuating these feedback loops and contributing to a digital *nepantla* of college-related information.

Despite this, I find that youth are savvy users of technology and adept at leveraging it to their advantage. They recognize the biases inherent in university advertisements, understanding the promotional tactics institutions use to present themselves in a favorable light. However, collaborators also know how to shape their digital environments to suit their needs. For example, Andrés intentionally watched videos about engineering to influence his algorithm and receive more content related to the field. At the same time, students tend to place greater trust in content created by their peers or other content creators. They prefer culturally relevant content that aligns with youth culture (Kerman, 2024). As a result, the underlying infrastructure and potentially exploitative practices of digital technologies often become obscured to them. I find that all collaborators used Google Search for their college research and, for the most part, trusted the information they found online. This is concerning in light of research on search engine bias (Noble, 2018). New algorithmic features, such as Google's featured snippets, further encourage shallow information gathering, which then influences the content students engage with across digital platforms (Bink et al., 2022, 2023). Collaborators are influenced by a range of push and pull factors in their college decision-making process. Many were acutely aware of costs, which led them to avoid private or out-of-state institutions. Despite this, all aspired to apply to and enroll in a University of California (UC) institution, though they reported not receiving targeted ads or information from these schools.

Contributions to Literature

My research contributes to the college choice literature by critically examining the role of digital technologies and platforms in shaping students' decision-making processes. College choice models vary across disciplines, each offering distinct explanations for how students make

decisions and the factors that influence those decisions. According to this body of literature, students' choices are shaped by factors such as the costs and benefits of attending college (Becker, 1994; Long, 2007), access to institutional agents and school college-going culture (McDonough, 1997, 1998), and integrated approaches that consider human capital, cultural capital, and sociopolitical factors (Perna, 2006). While this body of work provides a foundation for understanding the complex factors influencing college choice, it largely overlooks the role of digital technologies in this process. My dissertation addresses this gap by treating digital technologies not only as embedded in the college choice process—such as in information gathering and the concept of digital *nepantla*—but also as key factors influencing social action in decisions about where and whether to apply to college.

A second body of work I contribute to is the enrollment management literature, specifically the supply-side perspective on how postsecondary institutions structure college opportunities through marketing and recruitment efforts. This body of literature is crucial for understanding how colleges and universities strategize their recruitment processes, often in ways that reinforce and perpetuate class and privilege (Stevens, 2007). Additionally, recent studies using data science methodologies, including web scraping of off-campus recruitment visits, have revealed biases in these efforts, with a clear prioritization of more affluent and white student demographics (Salazar et al., 2021). Further research has examined how student lists purchased from vendors such as the College Board and SAT are biased, reflecting a more privileged population of test-takers and the filters universities use to segment and target prospective students (Jaquette et al., 2022; Salazar et al., 2022). My contribution to this literature focuses on how marketing and advertising strategies shape students' college choices and access to college

opportunities, highlighting the role of digital platforms in this process. Therefore, I integrate the scholarship on college choice with that of enrollment management as argued by McLewis (2021).

Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation makes significant theoretical contributions to the study of college access, the sociology of education, and academic capitalism. Existing theories and models of college choice often provide race-neutral analyses, overlooking the intersectional identities of students from marginalized backgrounds. This omission limits a nuanced understanding of the college decision-making process, particularly in relation to students' life histories. In contrast, college-*conocimiento* centers the experiences of Latinx students, emphasizing the often non-linear path they take to college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Drawing from Perna's model of college choice, which highlights the multifaceted factors shaping students' decisions, college-*conocimiento* overlays this framework with Anzaldúa's (2002) theory of *conocimiento*, comparing the college-going process to an epistemological awakening (Acevedo-Gil, 2017).

Building on Acevedo-Gil's work, this dissertation applies the college-*conocimiento* framework to the digital realm. My findings underscore the crucial role of institutional and protective agents in collaborators' college pathways. However, despite receiving support from these agents, collaborators often return to digital spaces to gather college-related knowledge. This digital space, which I conceptualize as digital *nepantla*, represents an in-between space that connects the old and new worlds. Digital *nepantla* allows for the merging of digital and social dimensions, significantly impacting students' decisions. For instance, collaborators toggle

between the information they receive from institutional agents, family, and peers, and the content they engage with on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. In this digital *nepantla*, collaborators actively negotiate and evaluate the information they encounter, aiding them in their college decision-making process. By adding a lens to explore digital information gathering, I contribute to expanding the college-*conocimiento* framework and offer new insights into the role of digital spaces in shaping the college pathway.

I also contribute to the academic capitalism framework, particularly in its application to digital marketing within higher education. Academic capitalism, as articulated by Slaughter et al. (2004), helps us critically analyze the enrollment management behaviors of colleges and universities, particularly in the context of their increasing reliance on digital marketing strategies. Under this framework, digital marketing is viewed as a tactic in the marketization and commercialization of higher education, wherein institutions are driven to compete in an increasingly privatized and neoliberal education landscape. To maintain and grow their revenue, universities and colleges seek to bolster their prestige, attract more students, and maximize tuition income (Slaughter et al., 2004). Academic capitalism also illuminates how recruitment efforts often prioritize a whiter and more affluent demographic, reflecting the market-driven logic of higher education. However, my findings challenge this assumption. In my study, collaborators report receiving ads for private and out-of-state institutions, which are typically not the primary focus of recruitment for underrepresented or low-income students. This observation does not align neatly with the tenets of academic capitalism. There are a few potential reasons for this shift: first, institutions may be aiming to expand their diversity initiatives and reach a broader, more varied student body; second, private institutions, with their larger advertising

budgets, may target a wider audience knowing that, regardless of the actual student yield, they can artificially inflate their acceptance rates through recruitment efforts. By integrating academic capitalism with the role of digital technologies, this dissertation highlights how institutions are adapting their marketing and recruitment strategies to the digital age. Unlike traditional, place-bound recruiting efforts, digital platforms allow universities to transcend geographical limitations, enabling them to target and appeal to prospective students from a broader and more diverse range of backgrounds. This evolution in recruitment tactics suggests that higher education institutions are continually shifting their strategies in response to the pressures of the digital economy and the competitive landscape they face.

Methodological Contributions

This dissertation makes several important methodological contributions. The data collection process spanned 14 months of fieldwork, providing a rich, longitudinal perspective on how students engage with digital college advertisements. While other studies have used data science techniques or natural experiments to analyze advertising data, this dissertation employs a robust, critical ethnographic methodology grounded in Chicana/Latina feminist epistemologies. Although the sample size is relatively small, the use of *pláticas* (informal conversations) and ad collection allowed for a deeper examination of the ads students encountered, coupled with real-time interpretations from the students themselves. This approach enabled me to explore not just the content of the advertisements but the social practices and meanings embedded in them, drawing on both critical discourse analysis and, more importantly, the voices of the students. The rich, nuanced accounts of their lived experiences provide a more grounded understanding of how these ads and online information impact students' college decision-making. In contrast to

experimental or quasi-experimental studies, the ads for this research were collected by the students themselves, allowing them to actively make sense of the information presented and to reflect on how it shaped their college choices. This methodology, therefore, prioritizes student agency and offers a more in-depth, contextualized understanding of the intersection between digital advertising and college access.

Another key contribution of this dissertation is the design and application of a Chicana/Latina Critical Ethnography (CLFCE), grounded in Chicana/Latina epistemologies and ways of knowing (Haro & Martin, in review). Informed by the traditions of Chicana/Latina ethnographers, my coauthor, Dra. Bianca Haro, and I recognized that conventional critical ethnography did not fully capture the intersectional experiences of Latine youth, particularly Latina girls. Over the course of two years, we engaged in pláticas to conceptualize an ethnographic practice that diverged from traditional methods, one that better honored the voices of Chicanx/Latinx youth. From this process, we developed six guiding principles for a Chicana/Latina Feminista Critical Ethnography (CLFCE), which were shaped by our respective bodies of work and lived experiences. The first principle advocates for the use of Chicana/Latina feminist critical theories and methodologies that acknowledge agency and power within communities of color. The second principle calls for ongoing reflexivity on the part of researchers regarding their positionality and the power dynamics that influence research relationships. The third principle emphasizes actionable care, prioritizing the humanization of research collaborators and their needs throughout the process. The fourth principle focuses on *movidas*, recognizing how both researcher and collaborator navigate systems of oppression in their daily lives for survival. The fifth principle is deeply embedded in *comadreando*, which

refers to the co-creation of knowledge and the reciprocal, relationships between researcher and collaborator. Lastly, the sixth principle centers a political commitment to social justice, grounded in feminista values and pedagogies of the home (Bernal, 2001). In applying a CLFCE in this dissertation, I worked to hold space for my collaborators during every plática, consistently prioritizing their emotional and practical needs over my own data collection goals. Often, in these informal conversations, my collaborators were dealing with significant personal challenges—family conflict, relationship struggles, and anxiety about their futures. I made a conscious decision to create space for these moments, recognizing that the relational aspect of our work was as critical as the academic. While there are inherent limitations to any research methodology, and while traditional research practices can often harm the very communities we aim to serve, CLFCE encourages researchers to continuously reimagine and disrupt colonial and extractive research practices (Haro & Martin, in review). This methodology is not only a framework for collecting data but also a political act of solidarity and care that seeks to elevate and empower the communities at the heart of the research.

Implications: technology and social dimensions of access

Practice - Institutions

Policy discourse often centers on altering student and family behaviors in the college application process, without critically addressing the enrollment management practices that significantly shape students' college decisions (Salazar, 2019). From an institutional standpoint, colleges and universities must reflect on how their advertising strategies influence student behavior and perceptions. Findings from Chapters 3 and 4 highlight the role of online content in

shaping how students assign meaning to college-related messages and internalize ideas about who belongs in higher education. For example, despite receiving ads from private institutions and pre-college programs, Amíra recognized that she was not the target audience for these advertisements. If institutions are genuinely committed to creating a diverse freshman class, they must back up their rhetoric with meaningful action. Relying solely on digital ads is insufficient, especially when many ads focus more on aesthetics than providing substantive, informative content (Slaughter et al., 2004).

Collaborators expressed a desire for a more personalized touch in their college search, including opportunities to visit campuses, participate in college tours, connect with current or former students, and receive authentic, tailored communication—especially related to their prospective majors. They also sought out videos on social media from students, valuing a student point-of-view (POV) to better understand college life. To engage effectively with students, institutions must make their marketing content more culturally relevant, tapping into youth culture in ways that feel genuine and meaningful. However, there is a fine line here, as some consultant firms have suggested leveraging small content creators in ways that may seem inauthentic (Kerman, 2024). Institutions should prioritize strategic planning that is informed by student voices, ensuring that their marketing practices are ethical and that students are provided with credible, trustworthy information.

Moreover, institutions should build strong partnerships with schools and school districts to maintain open lines of communication through channels like email, virtual workshops, and in-person college visits. By doing so, they can ensure that prospective students are equipped with the information and support they need to make informed college decisions.

Advocacy - Students and Caregivers

The findings from this dissertation highlight the crucial role that parents and caregivers play in students' college decision-making processes. There is a significant need to provide parents from underrepresented backgrounds with the resources and support they need to guide their children through this process. For instance, Amíra's dad attended an after school program specifically designed for immigrant parents, which helped him better understand the college application process. However, it is important to acknowledge that many parents, particularly those in single-parent households, work demanding jobs, face numerous challenges, and may lack the time or resources to fully engage with the college application process. Given these barriers, postsecondary institutions and school districts must consider how to tailor their outreach efforts to meet parents and guardians where they are, providing accessible, relevant, and manageable information that aligns with their needs and circumstances. Involving parents in the decision-making process can help alleviate the sense of isolation that many students experience when navigating their college choices.

The findings also underscore the agency of youth as experts in navigating technology, but also their skepticism toward the information they encounter online. Students are increasingly adept at curating their own information by searching for content that influences their digital algorithms. This capacity for critical engagement should be nurtured by providing students—especially those from underrepresented backgrounds—with resources for critical media literacy. Many of these young people lack the support of trusted adults, making it even more important to equip them with the tools to scrutinize online content and develop a discerning sense of source credibility. Schools should consider integrating critical media literacy into their curricula to

foster this critical thinking and ensure that students are able to navigate the digital landscape effectively.

Schools also remain a vital resource in students' college access journeys. All the collaborators in this study participated in the Educational Opportunity Program (EISP), where they received direct support from Ms. Rendon. Despite the program's limitations, Ms. Rendon was instrumental in providing essential information about CSU and UC institutions. She organized campus field trips, workshops, and guest speakers to give students diverse perspectives on college. However, Ms. Rendon was the only person at the school in this position, and students at other high schools, even within the same district, do not have access to similar support. It is crucial that school districts, particularly those in the San Joaquin Valley, invest in programs like EISP. This region faces some of the lowest college-going rates in the state, and targeted programs like EISP have proven effective in addressing these disparities (Contreras, 2015). During the year I assisted Ms. Rendon in the college lab, the school achieved its highest-ever number of UC admissions. While progress has been slow over the past decade, scaling up programs like EISP could significantly increase the number of students in the region who successfully apply to and enroll in college.

Policy - Digital

Enacting marketing strategies that collect data on students to fuel algorithm-driven campaigns raises significant ethical concerns, particularly when it comes to the lack of transparency and oversight surrounding institutional recruiting practices. The methods by which colleges and universities obtain data on prospective students are often unclear, leaving students vulnerable to exploitation. Furthermore, questions about how this data is stored, protected, and

whether it is sold to third-party companies remain largely unaddressed. The absence of regulatory frameworks at the state and federal levels to safeguard student data privacy exacerbates these concerns. Institutions must take responsibility by clearly articulating how they collect, use, and protect student data, ensuring transparency throughout the process. Importantly, if student data is being used for marketing purposes, students should be fully informed about how their information is being collected, shared, and utilized. This approach would empower students to make informed decisions about their privacy and provide them with the opportunity to opt-out or control how their data is used. Ultimately, the onus should be on higher education institutions to prioritize the ethical treatment of student data, respecting students' rights to privacy and confidentiality, while maintaining trust in the college admissions process.

Future work

Findings from Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4, inform a future research agenda on digital marketing approaches to college access.

The first study focuses on the intersection of race and place in shaping college access. My dissertation findings suggest that both the geographies of college opportunity (Dache-Gerbino, 2018) and the intersectional identities of participants significantly influence their college decisions. Students, particularly those from the San Joaquin Valley, experience both racial and spatial segregation in their access to higher education opportunities (Puente & Vélez, 2023). Given these challenges, it is essential to better understand, at a broader scale, the types and volume of digital advertisements these students are exposed to, and how they interpret and engage with this information. In particular, investigating how students from rural, underserved

regions such as the San Joaquin Valley respond to these advertisements could provide valuable insights into the barriers they face in accessing college opportunities. Furthermore, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the experiences of students from underserved rural areas as compared to their peers in urban centers (Puente et al., 2023). A potential study could examine the geographical distribution of digital college advertisements, using geospatial analysis to track the frequency, content, and targeting of ads in different regions, with a specific focus on rural and underrepresented communities. This study could explore how the volume and content of these advertisements either facilitate or hinder college access for students in these areas, taking into account factors like race, socioeconomic status, and local college-going culture. By doing so, it would illuminate the role of digital advertising as both a potential mechanism for increasing college access or, conversely, as a barrier that exacerbates existing inequalities in college opportunity.

The second study focuses on a quantitative text-mining analysis of digital advertisements to extract the language and messages that influence students' perceptions and decisions about college. This study aims to advance our understanding of the marketing rhetoric embedded in digital advertising strategies, and how these strategies shape students' college choices at a broader, more systematic level. By using text-mining techniques, this research will analyze large datasets of digital ads targeted at prospective college students, identifying key themes, language patterns, and marketing tactics that may influence their decision-making process. The study will look for specific trends in how institutions use language related to prestige, cost, diversity, and student success, and how these messages align with students' aspirations or expectations of college.

The third study, furthers my research on practical initiatives to make college accessible to underrepresented students. Informed by previous scholarship on the impact of nudges aimed at increasing the knowledge and uptake of state financial aid for eligible California high school students (Linos et al., 2024), I aim to conduct a study of email advertisements most effective for providing students with college information and encouraging them to apply for admissions. Through focus groups with prospective high school students and variations in email communication, this study explores how the type and quality of information provided inform students' college decision-making. Understanding how postsecondary institutions can effectively reach underrepresented students is vital for enhancing college opportunities, particularly for rural student populations.

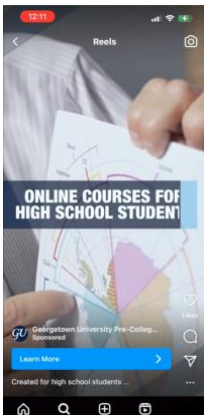
Fourth, an emerging area of research explores the rise, purpose, and effectiveness of pre-college programs, with a particular focus on how students and families assess the legitimacy and value of these opportunities. Online forums, including Reddit, serve as platforms where users engage in discussions, seeking advice from peers and strangers about the credibility and quality of these programs. Through digital community sense-making, individuals share personal experiences and reviews, offering insights that help others navigate complex decisions about pre-college opportunities. These peer-driven exchanges not only shape perceptions but also reveal the broader discourse around the accessibility, efficacy, and perceived legitimacy of pre-college programs. Through a content analysis, this study examines the discourse around pre-college programs in online forums. The study would begin by identifying relevant threads and posts from platforms like Reddit, focusing on discussions about the legitimacy and experiences of pre-college programs. By analyzing the language, sentiment, and shared experiences in these digital

communities, this study would offer valuable insights into the role of online peer interactions in shaping students' understanding of pre-college opportunities.

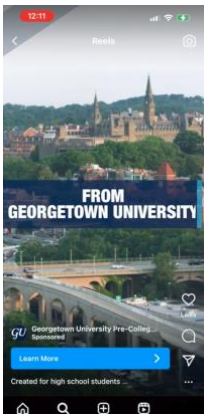
Lastly, grounded in Chicana/Latina Feminist epistemologies, a crucial strand of research emphasizes engaging directly with youth to shape pedagogical practices in media literacy. This approach aims to empower students by equipping them with the tools to critically analyze the digital content they encounter. One potential method involves teaching students how to program in R or another coding language, enabling them to analyze their own data. By incorporating data science techniques, students can explore digital media through a lens that is both academically rigorous and personally relevant. This approach not only fosters valuable data science skills but also promotes digital literacy and critical research practices. Importantly, it allows students to investigate and interpret data that directly pertains to their lives and experiences, helping them develop a deeper understanding of the digital landscape and its impact on their college decision-making processes. In doing so, this research underscores the importance of culturally responsive, student-centered pedagogy in preparing youth to navigate and critically engage with the complex world of digital media.

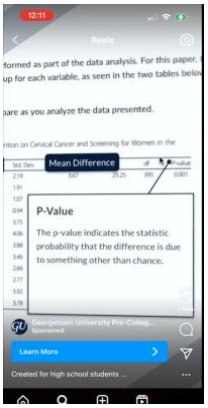
APPENDIX A: COMPLETE TRANSCRIPTION FOR GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY'S PRE-COLLEGE PROGRAM

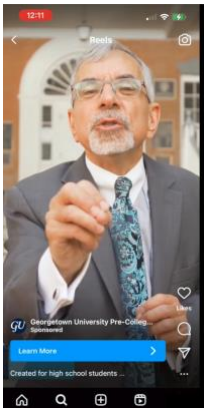
Advertisement collected by Amíra (0:14 sec)

Description	Image	Text on screen	Voiceover	Time Stamp
((Woman 1)) Woman with brown skin and sleek black hair parted on the right side is wearing a white lab coat. They adjust their glasses by placing them on.			((Man 1)) Being delivered…	(0:00-0:01)
Close up of a person with light tan skin holding up a diagram with their right hand and pointing at the diagram with their left index finger.		Online courses for high school	…exceptional content…	(0:01)

((Woman 2)) Woman with light brown skin and sleek black shoulder length hair holding up a notepad with both hands against a whiteboard facing the camera. She is wearing blue latex gloves and has on a navy blue suit and clear glasses. On the whiteboard there is a yellow “Crime scene do not enter tape” and a tv/monitor against the wall. ((Man 1)) Man with brown skin, facial hair ((mustache and beard)), and braided hair and pulled back in a ponytail wearing glasses and a white and blue striped shirt speaking at the camera. Scenic view ((wide	 	students	…from one of the… …best institutions in the world.	(0:02-0:03) (0:03-0:04)

view)) of Georgetown University campus. Screen share of a website containing information about the CIA Director and President Obama.	  	From Georgetown University Georgetown University		(0:04-0:05) (0:06-0:09)

((Man 2)) Man with light tan skin and gray and white hair wearing a light blue jacket writing on a yellow sticky note on a white board.		Pre-college Online Program	((Man 3)) You don't have to have…	
Screen share of a diagram explaining the P-Value.		Explore Inspiring Careers	…any pre-knowledge,… …all we ask..	(0:09-0:13)

((Man 1)) Man with brown skin moving an object around ((can't tell what it is)) in a circular movement. ((Man 3)) Man with light tan skin, white facial hair, and white hair wearing a gray suit, blue patterned tie, and glasses speaking to the camera. Makes a fist with his hand and opens it up.	 	Before You Go To College	…that you bring to the table… …is curiosity,...	

		Apply Now! Georgetown University Pre-college Online Program	…interest, and passion.	(0:13-0:14)

APPENDIX B: COST OF BROWN'S PRE-COLLEGE PROGRAM

Summer@Brown*				
Format	**Length**	**Program Cost - Residential****	**Program Cost - Commuter†**	**Program Cost - Online‡**
On Campus	1 week	$3,584	$2,960	N/A
On Campus	2 weeks	$5,534	$4,286	N/A
On Campus	3 weeks	$8,006	$6,134	N/A
Hybrid	5 weeks	$10,386	$8,514	N/A
Online	2 weeks	N/A	N/A	$3,218
Online	3 weeks	N/A	N/A	$4,454
Online	4 weeks	N/A	N/A	$5,314
Online	6 weeks	N/A	N/A	$6,238

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