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What They are Really Saying: An Analysis of the Messages in Full-time Virtual School Television-length Advertisements

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What they are really saying: An analysis of the messages in full-time virtual school television-length advertisements

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Abstract: Virtual schooling in America is a complex notion, one riddled with simultaneous claims of provenance coupled with poor achievement results when compared to other forms of schooling. Recruitment practices for virtual schools, specifically available television-length advertisements from a national list of fully online schools, comprised a data set around which this study revolved. We examined how virtual school television-length advertisements represented or misrepresented their approach to schooling by utilizing a cultural studies technique of performing preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Qualitative analysis—including an independent interrater process—led to findings that often directly contradicted the messages present in the television-length advertisements, as well as currently available research on the performance and practices of virtual schools. Thus, virtual schools should consider the manner in which race, student

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis Beck is an Associate Professor of Educational Technology at the University of Arkansas and led the research team including professor Christian Z. Goering and two former University of Arkansas doctoral students, Seth French and Johnny Allred now at Bentonville High School and Brigham Young University. Beck teaches courses in instructional design, integrating technology into the curriculum, and educational technology research. His research focuses on and advocates for digital, educational equity for vulnerable populations, with an emphasis on culturally and linguistically diverse and special education students at the primary and secondary levels. Together as a team, the experience of seeing an increase in television-length commercials for virtual schools initiated a conversation about virtual schools and their benefits/drawbacks, especially around then recent achievement data. Given that this inquiry happened prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, when much of the world shifted to modes of virtual learning, provides a backstop on which future virtual school research can push against as recruiting tactics, achievement, and other variables naturally change.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Virtual schooling in America often contrasts claims of academic success with poor achievement results when compared to other forms of schooling. Recruitment practices—including television-length advertisements–for virtual schools are of particular importance, as these efforts are designed to attract new students. We examined advertisements from a national list of fully online schools, considering how they represented or misrepresented the realities of virtual schooling. Our results showed that many of the messages presented in the advertisements often directly contradicted what is known about virtual schools writ large. Specifically, our study demonstrated that race, student performance, and teacher quality are often portrayed differently in commercials compared to currently available research on the performance and practices of virtual schools. This article considers the importance of these contradictions in light of the best practices which should be used by virtual schools and makes recommendations for truth in advertising when children's success and happiness are at stake.

performance, and teacher quality are portrayed in the teaching, learning, and collaboration of their television-length advertisement recruitment efforts.

Subjects: Teaching & Learning - Education; Educational Research; Study of ODL and eLearning

Keywords: virtual school; cyber school; commercials; cultural studies

1. Introduction

"Full-time virtual schools" is a term used for free, public online schools that limit their enrollment to full time students (Gemin et al., 2017; Jones & Figueiredo-Brown, 2018; Molnar et al. 2019; Nespor, 2019). In 2019, over 297,500 full-time students and 2.25 million K–12 students were taking online courses in the United States (Gemin et al., 2017; Molnar et al. 2019). The last five reports from the National Education Policy Center, a non-profit research center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, highlighted extremely low achievement rates of full-time virtual schools as well as low graduation rates from their students (Miron & Gulosino, 2016; Miron et al., 2018; Molnar et al. 2019; Molnar et al. 2017; Molnar et al., 2015). During the same five year period, other center and think tank based research from Ohio (Ahn, 2016; Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2019), and Georgia (Public Impact and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2015), as well as state sponsored research from Michigan (Freidhoff, 2018, 2017; J. R. Freidhoff, 2016), North Carolina (Department of Public Instruction, 2017), Tennessee, (Potts & Donaldson, 2016), and Kansas (Legislative Division of Post Audit, 2015) mirrored these national findings while also showing weak growth rates in reading and math and other statewide summative assessments. Also, research by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) using a "virtual twinning" methodology found student achievement in virtual charter schools to be significantly less effective than in comprehensive public schools (CPS; Woodworth et al., 2015). This is particularly important in light of the recent COVID-19 global pandemic, which has led many schools to turn to virtual schooling in order to continue teaching children.

Unfortunately, little is known about the recruitment practices of full-time virtual schools. One understudied method of student recruitment is the use of television-length advertisements delivered through paid time on television and through school websites and social media. Full-time virtual schools have different racial, socioeconomic, and special education student representation versus CPS in the United States (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Molnar et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education). This milieu is one that rests at the crossroads of full-time virtual schools, advertising techniques, and the race, class, and representation of potential students.

In this study, we investigated the multiple messages of full-time virtual school television advertisements in the United States, employing Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding" model as our conceptual framework for analyzing these advertisements. In an effort to understand the racial, socioeconomic, and special education student representation in full-time virtual schools, we investigated the multiple messages of their advertisements, employing methods innate to the field of cultural studies (Hall, 1973, 1980). This approach addressed the question of why the research literature on full-time virtual schools' performance and demographics is dramatically different compared with their portrayals in television-length advertisements.

This study is guided by the following research question, derived from the literature: *How, if at all, do full-time virtual schools look and perform differently than their portrayals in these television-length advertisements?*

2. Literature review

Comprehensive public schools (CPS), by definition, have open doors for all students as well as a broad range of curricular and extracurricular offerings (Campbell & Sherington, 2013); however, some full-time virtual schools have actively shaped their student enrollments through selective

marketing that may not be equitable (Kotok et al., 2015; Lubienski, 2007). In her analysis of financial accountability and governance in full-time virtual schools in the United States, DeJarnatt (2013) referred to this process as creaming, when full-time virtual schools recruit higher-performing students and/or avoid high-risk students during the enrollment process. Similarly, Mann and Barkauskas (2014) examined full-time virtual schools in Pennsylvania, comparing content from each school's website with mainstream news reports about the schools. Their findings revealed a level of hypocrisy in the descriptions full-time virtual schools give themselves on their websites. They often claimed to be a free educational solution with unique resources, such as one-on-one time with teachers; however, data revealed that the national student–teacher ratio within full-time virtual schools was 44:1, compared to 16:1 in CPS (Molnar et al. 2019). Unfortunately, the recruitment practices of full-time virtual schools have the potential to impact how we view a school's organization, educational quality, and student diversity.

2.1. Effects of recruitment practices of full-time virtual schools on how we view school organization

Full-time virtual schools are perceived as offering more course options than CPS. As digital technology becomes more advanced, online education has the potential to organize opportunities for learning and critical thinking that may not be available in CPS settings. The popular notion that full-time virtual schools offer a wide range of course options is discussed widely and cited in prominent reports (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Gemin et al., 2018; Ronsisvalle & Watkins, 2005). Although not addressing full-time virtual schools, Hannum et al. (2009) argued that online courses may be rural students' only option for some courses. It should be noted that there is no evidence that full-time virtual schools in the United States actually provided more course options to students than CPS, and even if they do, more options does not necessarily mean greater student achievement (Molnar et al. 2019).

Another important school organizational characteristic involves parental involvement. In full-time virtual schools, parents are touted as very involved in their students' educational experience. Parents of full-time virtual school students in the United States have typically been financially stable with college degrees and place great value on learning (Author). A practitioner-focused article written for the International Dyslexia Association suggested that, for parent coaches to be effective, there must be a strong partnership among teachers, students, parents, and school administration (Coy & Hirschmann, 2014). This is important because in CPS research, parent involvement positively correlated with student achievement (Henderson, 1987). Additionally, work by Black (2009) indicated that parent and student interactions in full-time virtual schools may predict student achievement. The use of parent-coaches may lead to a public perception that full-time virtual school students excel in student achievement, but as already mentioned, this is not the case (Molnar et al. 2019).

2.2. Effects of recruitment practices of full-time virtual schools on how we view educational quality

Research shows that teachers influenced student learning more than any other educational factor (McCaffrey et al., 2004; Simon & Johnson, 2015). The Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management has set an expectation for New York public schools to have a highly-qualified, effective teacher in every classroom (Boyd et al., 2008). But what is the level of teacher quality in full-time virtual schools? Barbour, Huerta, and Miron (2018) suggested there's a need for clearer definitions of teacher training and licensure requirements in full-time virtual schools, including professional development regarding effective online teaching. They also called for teacher evaluation rubrics specific to online teaching quality.

Several online quality frameworks have highlighted teacher–student and student–student interactions (Quality Matters Program, 2014). The most recent of these is the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching that was authored in collaboration between Quality Matters and the Digital Learning Collaborative (Powell & Oliver, 2019). Additionally, peer-reviewed research with

adult student populations demonstrated that transactional distance was reduced and psychological connection to a course was increased through social presence, defined as the feeling of being present with other people during online communication (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Moore, 2013; Shearer, 2013; Short et al., 1976; Young, 2006). Other research with adult student populations suggested that student learning improves through quality interactions (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Baran & Correia, 2009; Ho & Swan, 2007; Naidu, 2013). One form of negative student–student interaction in K-12 schools, cyberbullying, has the potential to be a serious issue in full-time virtual schools. National statistics showed that 21% of students 12–18 years old experienced bullying (National Center for Education Statistics 2015) and 14.9% of 9th to 12th grade students experienced cyberbullying (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017). Most likely due to this, many full-time virtual schools adopted Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) that severely limit student interaction (Bosco, 2013; Oluwole & Green, 2015). For example, some AUPs restricted students from posting personal messages outside of classroom content (e.g., Louisiana's and Florida's full-time virtual school AUPs). Further, many full-time virtual schools stated that all communication using school software or hardware are public (Virginia Virtual School, 2017-18). But what are the effects on educational quality of these kind of instructional and administrative decisions?

2.3. Effects of recruitment practices of full-time virtual schools on how we view student diversity

Substantial research into full-time virtual school demographics in the U.S. showed that racial minorities, low-income families, and English language learners were underrepresented on a large scale, although more so in some states than in others (Barbour et al., 2017; DeJarnatt, 2013; Gulosino & Miron, 2017; Miron et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Education; Molnar et al. 2019; 2017). Data from the 2016–17 National Center for Educational Statistics website (U.S. Department of Education) revealed that almost 65% of students enrolled in full-time virtual schools were White-Non-Hispanic, with 14.1% Hispanic and 12% Black. This is in stark contrast to national averages in K-12 schools that were 49.1% White-Non-Hispanic, 15.5% Hispanic, and 25.5% Black (see also Molnar et al. 2019 for a discussion of this). Michigan, Wisconsin, Washington, Pennsylvania, and Idaho have also shown similar racial discrepancies (Barbour et al., 2017; Kotok et al., 2015; Molnar et al. 2019; U.S. Department of Education). In a related contrast, in 2017 in Ohio, African American students accounted for approximately 50–60% of the charter school population but only 10% of the full-time virtual school population (Ahn & McEachin, 2017). NCES data also showed that that full-time virtual schools served relatively few students who qualify for free or reduced lunches, the traditional marker for low-income within education (31.5% for full-time virtual schools compared to a 51.3% national average). Many full-time virtual schools claimed to provide resources for special education students, but it wasn't clear how this promise was being carried out (Molnar et al. 2019). Only .9% of students in full-time virtual schools were categorized as English language learners, compared to 9.6% overall in K-12 schools in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education). Ohio full-time virtual schools reported 0.5% of their enrollment as English language learners (ELLs), compared to 9.6% for all Ohio public schools (Barbour et al., 2017). In contrast was the higher proportion of full-time virtual school special education students (15.5%) compared to the national average of 13.1% in K-12 schools.

Full-time virtual schools have not been without changes in some of these demographic categories. Overall, the percentage of racial minority students in full-time virtual schools was slowly increasing until 2014–15, when it leveled off for the next two years (Molnar et al. 2019; U.S. Department of Education). This most likely reflected some changes at the state level; for example, Heiney et al. (2012) found that Colorado online schools' student population in 2011 was much more diverse than in 2003, though still with a White majority. Meanwhile, data from other states, like Texas, continued to show large differences in racial demographics between CPS and full-time virtual schools. The greatest discrepancies in representation were in the areas of Economically Disadvantaged (a 50.7% difference), followed by Hispanic (29.7% difference) and White (26% difference; Texas, 2012). Also, the ratio of special education students to the overall number of

students enrolled in full-time virtual schools in the U.S. has increased quickly, having moved from just under seven percent in 2010–11 to the current 2016–17 level.

Based on the data from various sources over the past decade and a half, full-time virtual schools consistently showed higher representations of White students than was represented in public schools across the nation. Ahn and McEachin (2017) suggested that racial minorities and poorer families don't have the same freedom to choose full-time virtual schools as other families, despite many of these schools being advertised as free and available for all (Mann & Barkauskas, 2014). They also suggested that there may be social and cultural reasons these disadvantaged students are underrepresented in full-time virtual schools. The stark reality, according to DeJarnatt (2013), is that full-time virtual schools neglected students from specific categories or with specific disadvantages.

3. Conceptual framework

We adapted Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding" model as our conceptual framework for analyzing full-time virtual schools television-length advertisements. The original model, which has been utilized in a variety of research studies (Kropp, 2015; Morley & Brunsdon, 1999), was built upon the notion that all messages are "encoded" with a preferred reading of how the creator intends the message to be received and are "decoded" in what he called preferred, negotiated, and/or oppositional ways by audiences. A preferred reading is one that fully accepts the creator's message in the way it was intended to be received; an oppositional reading assumes a stance in stark contrast to the preferred reading, rejecting most, if not all, of what the preferred reading would accept; and a negotiated reading acknowledges elements in the message that could be problematic without fully adopting either a preferred or oppositional reading (Morley & Brunsdon, 1999; Trier, 2014). Which reading consumers adopt depends on a variety of factors, such as biases, cultural background, prior knowledge about the topic, life experiences, and socioeconomic status.

Contrary to how other researchers have employed Hall's "encoding/decoding" model (Ang, 1985; Herzog Massing, 1986; Katz & Liebes, 1990; Thomas, 2010), in which audiences' responses to encoded messages were gathered and identified as preferred, negotiated, or oppositional, we employed a slightly different approach. Because we were more interested in identifying the three readings of the advertisements than we were in analyzing participants' reasons for decoding the advertisements, we asked each participant to identify what they would consider a preferred, negotiated, and oppositional reading to each advertisement after viewing it. In this way, we could include our own identifications of the three readings for each advertisement with those provided by our participants for the purposes of triangulation and interobserver agreement.

4. Methodology

In this study, our purpose was to investigate the multiple messages of full-time virtual school television advertisements, employing Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding" model as our conceptual framework for analyzing these advertisements. In an effort to understand the racial, socioeconomic, and special education student representation in full-time virtual schools, we investigated the multiple messages of their advertisements, employing methods innate to the field of cultural studies (Hall, 1973, 1980). This approach addressed the question of how, if at all, do full-time virtual schools look and perform differently than their portrayals in these television-length advertisements.

We began with the corpus of all full-time virtual schools in America as reported in "Appendix B: Virtual Schools and the Students They Serve" (Molnar et al. 2017). From the list of 458 full-time virtual schools, we narrowed the study corpus to schools that posted video advertisements on their websites or social media accounts. A careful review of each school in October 2017 netted 204 school advertisements. We then further narrowed the advertisements by selecting seventy two that fit a natural television advertisement time frame of 30–60 seconds. We chose to do this because we wanted to focus on the messages used to attract new students. In our final selection step, we individually

watched all of the videos and selected ten exemplars to study further based on national percentages of students enrolled in Connections Academy schools, K-12 Incorporated schools, and other schools (Molnar et al. 2017). Each advertisement was authored using a cacophony of tools available to anyone who wants to create a television advertisement, resulting in some advertisements with professional actors, while others used real life teachers, students, and parents. They also used music and other contextual elements to portray the intended rigor and attractiveness of virtual schools.

Our method of analyzing the advertisements employed a synthesis of Au's (2007) inductive template coding method, which uses a "template of codes" that begins with broad themes and moves toward more narrow or specific ones. We designed this "template of codes" based on Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1973, 1980). Together, we viewed each advertisement multiple times and collected our individual readings of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings of each in a shared electronic document. This process also aligned with Au's (2007) staged approach, as the initial codes we applied to the first advertisement grew in number and complexity as we continued through the rest of the advertisements.

As a measure of reliability, we then asked five additional, independent researchers uninvolved with the study to perform preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings of each video to compare to our own (Au, 2007). These researchers were graduate students in education and were previously trained in qualitative methodologies. We created a short video to provide an overview and training in how to complete a preferred, negotiated, and oppositional reading of each advertisement.

After these readings were completed, each co-author then coded the data set within each type of reading. Our goal was to achieve categorical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). We created codes as we analysed ideas from the participants' responses and then reached agreement on all individual codes. These codes were based on participants' responses that were similar, such as student appearance, parent involvement, bullying, etc. To further reliability in this process, we practiced reflexivity in our coding by discussing the codes and how they interacted with our personal research orientations in relation to the study (Kwok, 2017; Li & Koedel, 2017).

5. Results

Halls' preferred, negotiated, and oppositional codes were inductively grouped into the broader themes of school characteristics, people characteristics, and television-length advertisement characteristics. School characteristics were defined as features belonging to the school advertised. School characteristics were broken down into the categories of a) organizational, administrative, or structural attributes; b) quality education; and c) interpersonal communication. People characteristics were defined as features belonging to people associated with the school (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, parents, etc.). Television-length advertisement characteristics were defined as features belonging to the commercial itself. In the results that follow, the information presented in quotation marks represents a direct quote taken from a reviewer's reading of a television-length advertisement to demonstrate the concept being discussed.

5.1. Preferred readings—school characteristics

The preferred readings portrayed a positive image of full-time virtual schools. Children attending these schools chose from nearly unlimited options in coursework and customized their schedules to fit the time and place they accessed the courses: "[This school] allows students to individualize their own instruction to accommodate their busy schedules outside of school." The terms *personalized learning* and *individualized learning* were often emphasized, with a focus on location, pace, and student abilities: 1) "Learn whenever, wherever, on my schedule—this is very convenient," and 2) "[The school] allows students to explore their strengths and work on their chosen path, [and you can] customize your educational experiences around your interests, not the school's curriculum."

Course availability and options emerged as themes, indicating a student-centered attitude that life was more important than school: 1) "School should adapt to you, not the other way around," 2) "I like that my education is customized to my schedule and unique needs—this seems to be something the public school experience can't give me." These readings also showed a strong emphasis on the attractiveness of the technology: 1) "It is a one-to-one environment," 2) "The technology use is intriguing and attractive to me."

Other preferred readings highlighted the small class sizes and student-to-teacher ratios depicted in these television-length advertisements: 1) "Small class sizes and better relationships with teachers than in [CPS]," 2) "Class size is small and deep conversation with teachers and classmates." Additionally, the schools have no costs for tuition and are thus affordable by most people. This concept appeared to be interpreted in different ways in the readings: 1) "Free, online public school to help me to overcome my problems," 2) "I like the sound of free public schooling that is online yet still has beneficial interaction with real teachers." Others appeared to connect this with schooling at different times of the year: "Free public online school, Free online summer school. I would go for a free online school like this." Families were also highly active, with family coaches acting as tutors to help students learn: "I'm glad there are family coaches to assist in the learning process to help me (as a parent) successfully facilitate my child's learning." There was an attitude that family coaches helped make online learning work for kids.

The image of a quality education was also strongly portrayed through the use of high quality curricula that includes Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. The curriculum was described as "innovative," "rigorous," "flexible," "accredited," and "engaging" and was "aligned with CCSS and state standards" in the readings. There was also an emphasis on how it prepared students for a career: "Career path is integral to curriculum." This curriculum is taught by highly-qualified, certified teachers. Preferred readings portrayed these teachers as "high quality," "always there to help," having "high expectations," and as "work[ing] closely with students": 1) "Certified teachers will be guiding students in this journey," 2) "This school has a variety of teachers, so I think my kid will have a good learning experience here."

5.2. Preferred readings—people characteristics

Interpersonal communication was depicted as rich teacher–student and student–student communication and collaboration, showing individual tutoring and small groups learning together both in person and online: "Teachers are interacting with each student. My child will have experts to guide him/her." These interactions are bolstered by a fun and friendly social environment in which children can get to know other kids and develop friendships without the fear of bullying: 1) "Activities are available to help students communicate and having fun," and 2) "There is no bullying." While maintaining a high level of rigour academically, affective soft/life skill goals for these schools appeared to be the promotion of overall happiness in children: "All of the people in this online school are smiling and happy." Soft/Life skill goals for student development focused on critical thinking, creativity, becoming an independent thinker/doer, and a responsible citizen: "I like this school because they help students to be 'critical thinkers' and 'responsible citizens.'" Overall, these schools painted a picture of institutions that provided academic, social, and other services that led to the development of the entire person.

5.3. Preferred readings—television-length advertisements' authenticity

The readings presented a diverse population of students attending these full-time virtual schools who were intelligent, able to accomplish anything, and destined for college and productive lives:

(1) "Your child can go anywhere and accomplish anything and move up in the world and be successful if they attend [this school]"

(2) "The two actors represent racial diversity and seem like wonderful kids to send my kid to school alongside."

The readings of the television-length advertisements' features highlighted endorsements from many different kinds of "real" people (not actors, but real students, parents, principals, local business people, etc.), combined with positive student testimonials that focused on their academic and social experiences, yet with a professional quality to the production:

(1) "Production value of the ad features layered meanings—of a professional calibre like a national TV ad"
(2) "I like that the testimonials seem authentic–not paid actors trying to sell me something"
(3) "Millions of students have been through [this school], so it must be good."

5.4. Negotiated readings results

The negotiated readings of the organizational, administrative, or structural attributes of these full-time virtual schools generally accepted the preferred meaning, but also worked to resist and modify it in a way that seemed to reflect the reader's own experiences and interests. Readers understood that customized learning involved student choice and flexible course options, but questioned what that actually looks like in the context of a full-time virtual school that still adheres to state and national standards:

> Do the certified teachers build their own curriculum, or is it provided by [this school]? If provided for them, I feel like the teachers wouldn't be that invested in the process. If built by teachers, how can it be truly personalized to my kid?

Barriers to school entry such as cost, Internet and computer access, and a location at which to complete schoolwork were also explored, as were the the cost and responsibilities of a learning coach: 1) "Tuition-free sounds great. So what do I have to pay for?" 2) "The teacher/parent coaches seem committed but are they qualified and by whose measure?" Finally, readers asked why the most obvious characteristic of the full-time virtual school—its online, technology-based nature—was downplayed in the television-length advertisements: "Why isn't online emphasized more? This is an online school and I mostly saw people without computers."

The concept of a quality education was also questioned, as were the rigour of curricula, teacher quality, and student achievement in full-time virtual schools:

(1) "How qualified are the 'dedicated teachers' at [this school], and why do they teach through [this school] rather than a different [full-time virtual school] or public school?"
(2) "How does [student achievement] differ from the success of a [CPS] student?"

Interpersonal communication focused on student–student and teacher–student interaction. Readers seemed to accept that both were in full-time virtual schools, but questioned how these two types of interactions differed due to technology, course structure, and kinds of interaction (i.e., synchronous and asynchronous): "The child said she gets lots of one-on-one attention from the instructor … Are there other students present?" Full-time virtual schools' claims about the elimination of bullying also appealed to readers: "Avoiding negative experiences like bullying is certainly an appeal for my children/students if that is ensured."

The negotiated readings questioned student appearance, diversity, and parent involvement in the television-length advertisements. The dress and body type of students in the television-length advertisements were questioned: "At the beginning of this commercial I thought it [was] about fashion. The whole commercial was focusing on the guy while he is walking on the street wearing nice shoes and suit." Also, negotiated readings reflected a concern that the mix of ethnicities and genders in the television-length advertisements did not reflect the full-time virtual schools' demographics: "The diversity of the actors in the advertisement is appealing but I'm inclined to distrust it–is [this school] a place with a thriving community of people from different races?" Finally, the

unique aspect of parent involvement was questioned, with a specific focus on whether parents were required to be home with the student: "Do I have to help teach my kids? Parents are in most every picture?"

5.5. Oppositional readings results

The oppositional readings of the school characteristics for the full-time virtual schools understood the intended meaning of the television-length advertisements but filtered the message in a way that fits their frame of reference and is in a direct, oppositional relationship to the intended meaning. In sum, "I'm sceptical that this school would provide all the things it claims here," or, "what's the catch?" The organizational, administrative, or structural attributes confronted were related to barriers of entry, course selection and availability, class size, and the use of technology. Technology and Internet access, cost, and location of schooling were viewed as significant barriers to students' participation in the full-time virtual schools. Also, students' freedom to choose from an array of courses and customize their own curriculum to the extreme degree presented in the television-length advertisements was challenged. The claim of small class sizes was doubted from the perspectives of personal experience, statistics, and scholarly literature. Finally, the schools were accused of hiding a primary attribute: the fact that it is online and there was "no talk about online learning at all; students could sign up without realizing it is online" This was addressed through comments that discuss the near or complete absence of technology from the television-length advertisements.

The concept of quality education was also tackled. Given the normal distribution of children of varying levels of achievement and intelligence in most public schools, the claim that all students in these full-time virtual schools were academically successful or intelligent in a special or unusual way was debunked. Specifically, the image of academically successful students was challenged by current research on the effectiveness of full-time virtual schools. Analysis also questioned teachers qualifications, "How are teachers chosen and qualified?" along with the definition of rigour in a curriculum, and what the alignment of standards means.

Interpersonal Communication was questioned, with a focus on how students actually interacted with each other. The claim of a bully-free environment was critiqued, "How can you guarantee no bullying?" with an emphasis on the reality of schooling, where bullying and classroom drama are a part of every school, and to suggest otherwise is disingenuous.

The oppositional readings of the full-time virtual schools' television-length advertisements showed clear, alternate interpretations of the intended meanings. For example, what the authors intended to be a professionally produced advertisement was reinterpreted as a an infomercial, including the use of one-liners, narrators, and other characteristics common to infomercials: "Are these actual Connections students (i.e., What is their incentive for being in the commercial, smiling and holding a laptop with a catchy slogan/phrase)?" Also, the nearly exclusive focus on offline learning when advertising an online school was critiqued, with questioning of why the schools would advertise using images of students learning in a face to face environment while in reality they learned in a completely online school: "Most students will NOT be working outside in the sun and together—[full-time virtual school] work is individual and inside. So why depict it this way?" Finally, approval statistics provided by the schools were doubted as being self-serving at best.

The oppositional readings of the people in the television-length advertisements appeared to focus on students' appearance, others' appearance, and the requirement for parent involvement. The critique expressed concern that students in the television-length advertisement appeared to look like models or display fake expressions, and also do not reflect the racial, or socioeconomic characteristics of students in most schools: "What about access for those who are poor/unable to afford technology and internet access?" and "features students from a wealthy background." Those other than students also appeared to have the same lack of authenticity, and lack of

correlation to the racial or socioeconomic characteristics of others present in most schools, like the question, "Why are all the students white?"

Finally, the nature of and requirement for parent involvement was challenged, presenting serious concerns about the parent requirement presenting an invisible barrier to student access for students whose parents both work, or are a single parent: "Where will students take classes if their parent/guardian is at work?"

6. Discussion

In this study, we investigated the multiple messages of full-time virtual school television advertisements, employing Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding" model as our conceptual framework for analyzing these television-length advertisements. To accomplish this, coders completed a preferred, negotiated, and oppositional reading of each video, and these readings were then coded for themes within each type of reading. The readings were themed under school, educational quality, and people and commercial characteristics.

6.1. School organization characteristics

The school organization characteristics addressed in our results were course options, class size, and parent coaches. The television-length advertisements emphasized a variety of curricular options for full-time virtual school students in their schools. No one is denying the potential for online education to provide opportunities for learning and critical thinking that may not be available in CPS settings (Gemin et al., 2018; Ronsisvalle & Watkins, 2005). Our analysis revealed that readers liked the idea of curricular flexibility; however, readers were skeptical that full-time virtual schools actually delivered on this ideal. They were unsure how the curriculum was designed to align to state standards while also providing great flexibility. Our readers also associated the claims of small class sizes with the quality of interactions between teachers and students. Molnar et al. (2019) demonstrated that full-time virtual schools tended to show unacceptable academic performance when their overall enrollments and student–teacher ratios increased. The fact that some full-time virtual schools were showing very large enrollments and high student–teacher ratios complicates the claims presented in these television-length advertisements.

Another school organization characteristic that readers perceived was that the parents and families depicted in these television-length advertisements were highly involved, integral elements of full-time virtual schools. Considering that parent involvement was positively correlated with student achievement in CPS (Henderson, 1987), the idea of parents as active participants in student learning is highly attractive. However, this isn't easily accomplished. As evidenced in our literature review and backed by NCES data, parents of full-time virtual school students have typically been financially stable, have earned college degrees, and placed great value on learning (Author; Molnar et al 2019; U.S. Department of Education). Others suggested that for parent coaches to be effective, there must be a strong partnership among teachers, students, parents, and school administration (Coy & Hirschmann, 2014). Readers got the sense that parent coaches were necessary for the success of many of the schools in this study, yet it is unclear how they actually accomplish this type of relationship. Further research into this specific aspect would be important for determining the effectiveness of these coaches.

6.2. Educational quality characteristics

The educational quality characteristics addressed in our results were quality teachers, academic achievement, teacher-student interactions, and student-student interactions. Teacher quality is important, as research has shown that effective teachers were related to a 50 percentile improvement in student achievement within three years (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). With recent focus on standards-based instruction, schools were expected to have a highly-qualified, effective teacher in every classroom (Boyd et al., 2008). The full-time virtual schools depicted in the television-length advertisements showed highly-qualified teachers who worked closely with students while maintaining high expectations. Readers wondered how these full-time virtual schools determined

teacher quality and how they compared to teachers in CPS. They also questioned how closely teachers could work with students in an online setting. Barbour, Huerta, and Miron (2018) suggested that there is a need for clearer definitions of teacher training and licensure requirements in full-time virtual schools, including professional development regarding effective online teaching. They also called for teacher evaluation rubrics specific to online teaching quality.

Academic success is an important educational quality characteristic for any school, and these television-length advertisements consistently touted their ability to produce results. Readers highlighted the schools' claims to help students cultivate college-ready skills, train them for successful careers, and develop them into people who love learning. Concerns centred on how full-time virtual schools defined academic success and how they ensured academic rigour. Molnar et al. (2019) found that 48.5% of full-time virtual schools received acceptable performance ratings, and that the same schools averaged a 50.1% on-time graduation rate. Their findings aligned with other research which showed low student achievement in full-time virtual schools (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Woodworth et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the message appeared to directly contradict the existing research.

Another of the educational quality characteristics that most of the television-length advertisements claimed was rich teacher–student and student–student interactions. This is no surprise, as several online quality frameworks have highlighted these kinds of interactions (Middle States guidelines 2002; Quality Matters Program, 2014). As previously stated, interactions have increased learning (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Baran & Correia, 2009; Ho & Swan, 2007; Naidu, 2013), reduced transactional distance, and strengthened students' connection to the course through increased social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Moore, 2013; Shearer, 2013; Short et al., 1976; Young, 2006). However, a teacher-student ratio of 44:1, which is 2.7 times that in CPS, leads one to wonder how teachers in full-time virtual schools have the time for these rich interactions.

Student-student interactions in the television-length advertisements was another educational quality characteristic that was addressed in this study. The claim of "no bullying" was frequent. This is a startling claim in light of national statistics that showed that 21% of students 12–18 years old experienced bullying (National Center for Education Statistics 2015) and 14.9% of 9th to 12th grade students experienced cyberbullying (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017). As a result, it is no surprise that our readers expressed skepticism about this claim, having stated that bullying is in every school, and that to suggest otherwise is disingenuous. Oluwole and Green (2015) suggested that Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) were one reason that this claim could be true (see also, Bosco, 2013). These policies severely limited student freedom to post personal messages outside of classroom content (e.g., Louisiana's and Florida's full-time virtual school AUPs). Further, many full-time virtual schools stated that all communication using school software or hardware are public (Virginia Virtual School, 2017-18). Such severe limitation of student interactions may succeed at eliminating bullying (which is still doubtful), but may also prevent authentic, high-quality interactions, which as mentioned before was related to student learning (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Ho & Swan, 2007).

6.3. People and television-length advertisement characteristics

The people and television-length advertisement characteristics addressed in our results were the diversity present as well as parent involvement. Readers found the diversity among full-time virtual school student populations to be one favorable characteristic of the television-length advertisements. But just how diverse are these schools based on recent demographic data? As shared in the literature review, data from the 2016–17 National Center for Educational Statistics website revealed that almost 65% of students enrolled in full-time virtual schools were White-Non-Hispanic, with 14.1% Hispanic and 12% Black. This was in stark contrast to national averages in K-12 schools that were 49.1% White-Non-Hispanic, 15.5% Hispanic, and 25.5% Black (see also Molnar et al. 2019 and other NEPC reports). Based on the data from various sources over the past decade, full-time virtual schools—despite representing a diverse student population in their

television-length advertisements—consistently enrolled higher representations of White students than were represented in public schools across the nation.

Another favorable characteristic offered by the television-length advertisements was the level of parental involvement in their child's education. While it is challenging to verify how accurate for most full-time virtual school students, literature from CPS supported the assertion parental involvement is an important component in helping students excel (e.g., Henderson, 1987). Additionally, work by Black (2009) indicated that parent and student interactions in full-time virtual schools may predict student achievement, but more research with a mixed approach needs to be done to understand the extent of this phenomenon. The success of the full-time virtual school model depended on parents' ability to devote significant time to providing support for their children, though perhaps less time for high-school aged students. This model provides hope that full-time virtual schools take an active role in supporting parents as they support their children.

7. Implications, future research, and conclusions

This study addressed the question of why the research literature on full-time virtual schools' performance and demographics is dramatically different compared with their portrayals in television-length advertisements. We investigated the multiple messages of full-time virtual school television advertisements and employed Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding" model as our conceptual framework for analyzing the television-length advertisements. Results showed that the preferred messages of these television-length advertisements conflicted with research findings from the literature on topics of student achievement, teacher–student and student–student interactions, and the representation of diverse groups in the schools.

Parents and guardians who select educational options for their children should be made aware of the conflicting claims of full-time virtual schools. State legislators, as well as CPS administrators, could make this information more readily available for parents/guardians to access, thus providing a level of preventive protection from false messages found in advertisements. Additionally, there is a need to better regulate the advertising and marketing efforts of full-time virtual schools. In the U.S., the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has this responsibility as well as the ability to seek legal solutions and levy fines when corporations do not follow its rules. The FTC's requirements for advertisements are: a) truthful and not deceptive; b) able to be substantiated with evidence; and c) not unfair. An advertisement is considered untrue by the FTC if it either possesses or omits information that could mislead a customer in their decision to try the product in question. An ad would be unfair if it led the customer to suffer substantial customer injury. Even if we were to only consider the verifiably poor academic achievement of full-time virtual schools, their advertisements' claims to high quality instruction and student academic success, and the resulting academic injury incurred by potentially thousands of K-12 students, this would seem to be a textbook situation for the FTC to investigate.

Up until now, the FTC has not been involved in regulating full-time virtual school advertisements, but perhaps this should change, and not without some precedent; for example, the FTC maintains a "diploma mill" website to warn consumers against fraudulent companies that award higher educational degrees without any student work (see https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0206-college-degree-scams). Additionally, this report on Canadian K-12 diploma mills shows that the problem may be more widespread than it appears (Pagel, 2020).

Unfortunately, involvement by the FTC in regulational oversight is unlikely due to current educational priorities of the United States, which have emphasized economic efficiency over more traditional measures of educational quality (Apple, 2005, 2018). There is also growing empirical evidence that the current, market-based approach to parent choice has led to a widening of existing social divisions surrounding class and race in education in general (Apple, 2018), and in virtual schools in particular (Molnar et al. 2019), and that some in educational leadership have utilized internet technologies such as virtual schools to support ideological movements that promote these class and race divisions (Apple, 2011). Given the conflicts found in this article between claims and verifiable

evidence in virtual school television-length advertisements, even moderate regulation of their advertisements would most likely result in more truthful content and claims, allowing parents and caregivers to select a school based on verifiable evidence and not misleading messages.

There is also a need for future research to examine a large number of television-length advertisements produced by full-time virtual schools to determine if the conflicting messages discovered in this sample generalize across the larger population. We also need to analyse other types of advertisements and marketing by full-time virtual schools to see if these forms of media also conflict with verifiable evidence. Additionally, as this research is the first of its kind in terms of using Hall's methods with full-time virtual school advertisements, researchers need to explore the use of Hall's methods to examine how specific audiences of these television-length advertisements respond. For example, how do school-aged children and their parents respond? How do current full-time virtual school students and their parents respond to these messages? We as educators must grapple with the question of the influence of these advertisements on recruiting and the messages that these schools are sending.

Data for this research study were collected and analysed and the manuscript written prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, during the pandemic schools all over the world turned to virtual schooling in order to continue providing instruction to children. We believe that this widespread adoption of virtual schooling only serves to heighten the importance of these results and implications for virtual schools. Simply put, if the conflicting messages discovered in this sample generalize across not only the population of virtual schools, but of all schools that have gone virtual, then the education system is facing a credibility problem of mammoth proportions. There is a huge need for future research into the advertisements produced by virtual schools, and moreover, an even more pressing need for government regulation of virtual school advertisements in order to provide parents and caregivers with verifiable evidence by which to select a school.

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