

**MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS ON THE PORTRAYAL OF INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY:
A CASE OF PHILIPPINE UNIVERSITIES**

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Abstract

Website homepages serve as entry points of viewers to an institution and as tools of universities in reflecting their reputation to the global world. The scant research on looking into the institutional identity as reflected in the university's website in the Philippines pushed the researchers to explore on how higher education institutions portray their image on their website homepage. The multimodal discourse analysis framework, visual grammars of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the metafunctional dimensions (Halliday, 2005), and the Self-presentation (1959) and Frame Analysis (Goffman, 1974) were employed in the study. Two top universities in the Philippines were investigated for 10 days. Results revealed that the two universities' homepages have common features and layout. The visual elements and the verbal codes work together in framing the various practices and commitments of these universities that present their identities of being a research university, an international community, and community-oriented service learning, top performing universities, and an industry-driven university.

Introduction

Educational institutions today are working more than ever to make themselves visible in this highly competitive global environment of higher education (Mafofo & Banda, 2014). Universities are compelled by this competitive field to work hard at building and communicating their identities (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). This work can then be reflected in the many promotional tactics they use to draw in the public (Zhang, 2017).

One of these marketing techniques used by universities may be noticed on their websites due to the widespread use of the internet. As a window for its stakeholders and prospective students, universities use their websites to establish and communicate who they are to the outside world (Wen et al., 2020).

Moreover, a university website is a powerful tool for universities to communicate its information (Devi & Sharma, 2016) as well as to increase its linkages. It mirrors what the university aims and values (Stack, 2016 as cited in Bae et al., 2021). It also reflects the level, reputation, and image of the university through the visuals and texts it contains (Bae et al., 2021). In light of this importance, it is crucial to comprehend how a university creates its image through its website in order to develop a quality website that would market the institution.

Higher education marketing through university websites is already explored in the United States, Canada, Europe, Singapore, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates, and Japan (Papadimitriou & Ramirez, 2014) and China (Xu, 2023). There is also research on university websites that focus on examining what concepts of internationalization are present in it (Lewin-Jones, 2019) and how students are represented on the website (Lažetić, 2018; Zhang & Tu, 2019).

Meanwhile, as regards investigating university image or identity, most of the studies reviewed by Alcaide-Pulido et al. (2017) focused on university image from the point of view of the lecturers, non-teaching or administrative staff, society in general, and students. Yet none of the reviewed literature centered on understanding identity from the images and texts on the website.

Moreover, prior research on the websites has mostly concentrated on their functionality (Jones et al., 2021; Pollock et al., 2021; Pisuena & Lamis, 2023) rather than how institutions utilize websites to convey institutional image.

It can also be noted in the study Bae et al., (2021) that there are few studies that examine institutional image, however, these are often limited to Western country contexts such as the U.S., U.K., or the Netherlands (Graham, 2013; Saichaie, 2011; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2018).

In the Philippine context, Dela Cruz et al. (2021) studied how the top four Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs) namely, University of the Philippines, De la Salle University, Ateneo de Manila University, and University of Santo Thomas visually represented themselves in their official websites in terms of their teaching, research, extension, internationalization, campus and facilities, and student life.

The previous literature reflects that little work has been done on analyzing institutional identity as reflected in the university's website particularly in the context of the Philippines.

Considering the crucial roles that institutional websites may play in the worldwide sector of higher education and the scarcity of research on the institutional identity portrayal of these websites, it is best to explore how higher education institutions portray their image on their website homepage. Specifically, the study sought to answer the questions: 1) what are the features of the two universities homepages; and 2) how is institutional image communicated in university's website homepage?

The findings of the study would allow us to increase our current understanding on the roles of university websites and how institutions seek to portray themselves through crafted texts and visual images. The study would also help other universities better understand how their image is communicated semiotically.

Methodology

Research Design

The study made use of the principles of case study design (Stake, 1995 as stated in Michelson, & Valencia, 2016) in terms of its sample size and depth of inquiry. Case studies are selective and focus on specific aspects to give a full account of the phenomenon under examination (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003 as cited in Michelson, & Valencia, 2016). In this study, the websites of Ateneo de Manila University and the University of the Philippines, specifically their homepages constitute the 'case'.

Some of the approaches to examining the website are the multimodal discourse analysis framework, visual grammars of Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), and the metafunctional dimensions (Halliday, 2005).

Subject HEIs

The subject HEIs were two universities in the Philippines and were named in this study as University A and University B. The said HEIs were chosen based on being a top university in the Philippines.

Data Gathering

The researchers visited the official website of the two universities for 10 days and saved the screenshots from the top to the end of the homepage per visit. After which, the following steps were performed: 1) saved the components of the homepages into the excel sheet; 2) analyzed each component based on the visual grammars of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) for the visual component, the metafunctional dimensions (Halliday, 2005), and the Self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) and Frame Analysis (Goffman, 1974) as regards the identities.

Mode of Analysis

In the analysis, the steps done by Rungruangsuparat (2016) were followed. The gathered components underwent 2 phases of analyses. First was the analysis of the visual and verbal components. For the visual components, the concepts of Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Visual Semiotics, visual grammars of Kress & van Leeuwen (2006). Employing these analyses, the homepage layout overview was analyzed first, followed by the visual elements.

For the verbal components, the process and participants involved were identified, validated, and established using the metafunctional dimensions (Halliday, 2005).

The second phase of analysis was the interpretation of digitized practices by Self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) and Frame Analysis (Goffman, 1974) with the identities.

Ethical Considerations

The data gathering did not involve human respondents as it was primarily done through non-intrusive harvesting of publicly available visuals and texts from the website of the identified HEI. Contents are public materials that were intended to be disseminated to the general public. Hence, informed consent was not sought.

Results and Discussions

Features of the Two Homepages

Layout and Visual Codes

A quick glance at the two universities' homepages reveals a well-structured online interface with distinct ideational content that is separated into sections: the top banner, main menu, feature image, web content, and bottom banner.

The top banner which is utilized as a visual welcome remark was positioned at the Ideal (top) part. University A's top banner includes logo, name, and mantra located at the Given (left) area while University B had its logo and name only which are organized concentrically. This means that the university name and logo are vital in any homepage for university emblem or logo plays an important role in visual identity strategies (Foroudi et al., 2020). It is a symbolic seal reflecting the universities' aspirations, mandates, and commitment as well as their history.

The key menu in University A's webpage was on top wide spreading from left to right side while University B has the dropdown menu located at the top left. Below the top banner are the feature images with verbal codes and hyperlinks situated at the middle-down part of the image.

The central space of the homepage presents the main content. Both universities had a combination of visual and verbal narratives in presenting their content. These contents were grouped and framed into distinct categories. University A had four main categories and three categories for University B with one feature image horizontally laid out from left to right after the first category. The visual and verbal narratives were presented in a mixture of Ideal-Real layout for the first two sections in University A and in Given-New manner in the last two sections of University A and for the three sections of University B. Moreover, these were horizontally arranged where new information was placed from left to right in all the sections of University B and in the first two sections of University A. Meanwhile, the vertical arrangement was used in the last two sections in University A's contents. The bottom parts of both webpages include the corresponding section, some menus, and social media links.

Most of the spatial elements of the two universities' homepages were organized using the combination of horizontal (Given-New) and vertical (Ideal-Real) axis principles of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). Moreover, University B made use of the center axis in presenting its name and seal.

The contents of University B were mainly arranged in a Given-New layout or the left-to-right order which presents known information and new information, respectively. In all the sections, the images came first before the writings. This pattern is regarded as a Western style (Kong, 2019) and is the usual direction of reading. To Machin and van Leeuwen (2004), this layout polarizes elements into binary oppositions. Meanwhile, the contents in the last two sections in

University A's homepage arranges the visual and verbal codes in an Ideal-Real layout or the top-down manner. Positioning the image at the top highlights its significance as Kress and van Leeuwen (1998, p. 193) puts it as "the idealized or generalized essence of the information" (Knox, 2009, p. 276). The verbal codes positioned at the bottom of the image represent the 'Real' and usually these give more information about the image.

The findings denote that the positioning of the different elements and contents of the homepage reveals what the university emphasizes. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the parts of the homepages located at the top banner and at the bottom banner convey the Ideal and Real concepts whereby information at the Ideal area are the most important parts of the homepages. Both webpages focus on the minimalist design along with organized categories and heterogeneous presentation of content in each category which gives the user the necessary information without going overboard. The contents are arranged according to their significance in communicating core information. This also implies the reality of the institutions as spatial bodies that possess attributes and functions relating to their main purpose as exemplified by the categories and arrangements of the contents in their homepages. The homepage layouts of the universities have contributed to some extent in achieving the ideational function of the multimodal elements present in it.

Moreover, all the elements (verbal, visual, and multimodal) in the homepages of the two universities convey relations between the authors, the readers, and the content of the text. The homepage designs of both universities appear without perspective or in other words they present what is objectively there. There were no manipulated parts in the homepages. The elements were designed in a manner that the viewers' perspectives are not designed into the text. This reflects that the homepages of the two universities "neutralize perspective itself" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 149 as cited in Knox, 2009). The objective perspective of the two homepages is consistent with the function of the websites and the universities being represented, that is to provide objective and relevant information.

As to the illustration of factuality in the homepage or known as modality, the status or the use of hypertext resources, the space and shape, and the color in the homepage were observed. Hypertexts were seen in every news article on the two homepages but there are some variations as to the presentation of these. The visual elements on the homepages are all squared not rounded. These elements present an ordered page design to the readers through the compartmentalized groupings of the contents. Moreover, there is consistency in the sizes of objects and spaces on the page which contributes to the neat presentation of the content. As regards color, maroon and white were the primary colors in the header and footer of University A while deep and dark blue and white were the colors used in the homepage of University B. These were used to signify the institution's values and aspirations. All these visual elements work together to signify that the two homepages present their factual stance. These components that reflect the objectivity and factuality support the two homepages' effort to attract and retain viewers.

Verbal Codes and Hyperlinks

Another feature of the two homepages is the newsbites. These include the headline, lead, hyperlink news texts, and an image. The newsbites in University A's homepage were composed of an illustration (image), the focus (headline), the event (body of the newsbites), and a link. In University B's case, the focus and link were taken as one.

The various practices of the two universities were disclosed through the different contents of the two universities' website homepages. Institutional practices and achievements in the field of academics, research, creative work, and innovation, social responsibility, and internationalization are reflected mostly in the website content and in the main menu.

University A's homepage features informative and detailed content about the university's achievements, various academic programs, research initiatives, community involvement, and student services. The contents are academic in tone, reflecting the university's commitment to education and knowledge dissemination. Moreover, the events page of University A has an extensive schedule of scholarly, artistic, and local events. Lectures, seminars, conferences, and other pertinent events for the university community fall under this category. Every event listing has comprehensive details including the date, time, location, and a synopsis. This makes it easier for guests to decide whether or not to come by giving them a fast overview of the event.

On the other hand, University B homepage also utilizes language that is both engaging and accessible. By balancing academic rigor with approachability, the topic may be made accessible to both the public and the academic community. It also puts emphasis on the university's achievements, accomplishments, and research, creative works, and innovations. In terms of its events webpage, it includes an interactive design that makes it simple for users to peruse upcoming events. However, a calendar view, filters, and search options could improve user experience. In addition, to draw visitors' attention, the homepage showcases or features significant events on the homepage. These are important gatherings, shows, and talks by eminent speakers. Lastly, there was a strong emphasis on occasions that student organizations and groups have sponsored or arranged. This promotes student involvement in addition to showcasing the active campus life.

The different contents are known more by the viewers through the hyperlinks which projects the have potential interactivity of the homepage with the audience. These hypertext links allow readers to navigate the webpages thereby allowing multiple reading paths and perhaps interactivity. Meanings are created by readers through traversing from one link to the other link; it's like an "intertextual meaning relation" (Lemke, 2002 as cited in Hyland, 2018) will be created through the links. These links are key aspects of an online identity construction as these links provide more substantial information about a certain area or practice of a university.

Way by which institutional identity is portrayed

The homepage of the two universities portrayed their identity through the interactions of the different multi-semiotic elements present in it. The roles projected in the various elements that universities upload in the homepage create a desired impression to others (Goffman, 1959 as stated in Lupinetti, 2015). Some of the identities portrayed by the two universities are being a research university, an international community, and community-oriented service learning, top performing universities, and industry-driven universities. These identities were reflected verbally through the different focus and events of the newsbites combined with the power of the visual elements across the page. These visual codes helped facilitate the portrayal of these identities through its systematic organization on the page, the depiction of objective and factual stance in the layout, visual images, and in the contents, and most especially the representation of the social actors in the images. The hyperlinks have also contributed to depicting these identities as detailed information of the practices of the institutions could be found through them. In summary, the identities of the two institutions were portrayed through the interactions of the visual designs and verbal elements present in the homepage.

Conclusion

The website homepages of the two universities played a vital role in reflecting who they are to the global audiences. The webpages function as marketing tools for universities to attract students navigating their websites. These websites reflect the institutions' strengths in terms of its academics, research, community involvement, and other essential factors all were strategically presented in multimodal manner constructing positive institutional identities that would capture potential partners. Therefore, these findings have significant implications for higher education institutions to design appropriate communication tools to actively engage students and employees in a co-creation process to improve their services and image. Aside from reflecting institutional identities, this study unfolds the inclusion of different social media links in the university website homepage where some of the contents of their social media were linked to their university website. Thus, the study calls attention to explore on the multimodal analysis on how these universities display themselves in their social media platforms.

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