

Discourse Analysis of “Home” Pages of University Websites

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Abstract:- This paper focuses on the role and importance of a website in providing better opportunities for universities in Mongolia. University website is a powerful and influential tool for universities to promote and represent themselves both domestically and internationally. For the study, Critical discourse analysis was applied to describe, analyze and interpret the textual and visual representations on the official websites of eight universities in Mongolia. In other words, this study examined how the universities in the sample utilized language for their official websites to disseminate information, create their distinctive identity, enhance their reputation, last but not least, to attract prospective students.

Keywords:- Textual and Visual Representation, Disseminate Information, Faculty, Achievement.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper aims at investigating the texts and visuals on websites of Mongolian universities and finding out how they use discourse to represent themselves to the public as well as to promote their activities. Once Fairclough (1992) stated: “Discourse emerges from the interaction of language within and between textual and visual representations”. As university websites are both the appeal to their commercial interests for their prospective students, and the source of non-commercial information for current students, faculty and alumni, the need to have a reliable, powerful, useful and attractive website is increasing day by day in today’s digital world. Especially, the importance of university websites has significantly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. In brief, university website is a gateway to information of its advantages, products, services and daily activities. In this sense, it should be a reflection of the needs of the customers, though website design and components are often driven by technology or university objectives, rather than user needs. This may affect negatively on main aim of their website which is to recruit and attract students. In addition, website is the field where universities compete directly for students, academicians, departments and prestige. Universities know their websites are a global shop window but many struggle to reflect a coherent brand that showcases the strengths of individual departments (Neil Barr, 2018). Website users prefer visiting websites, which are easy to use and navigate, and aesthetically appealing.

Technology advancement has played an important role in improving and expanding education worldwide. Website is one of the effective technological tools through which higher education institutions can share their academic and business profiles with others. Universities use their websites to post their strengths, admission criteria and admission process, students and their academic progress, achievement, online/ in-class courses, daily activities etc. Now students do not need to come to university in person for getting information, choosing their compulsory or elective courses, checking their academic progress and schedule etc; instead they can do all wherever they have internet access. Fortunately, we have internet access almost everywhere in Mongolia. According to International Telecommunications Union (ITU), overall internet connectivity in Mongolia is higher than the world and regional average. People living in urban areas enjoy quality and affordable internet access through fixed connections and mobile usage. For instance, there were 1,4 million 4G/LTE users and 2,5 million 3G users in 2018, which outnumbers the total population of the country.¹ The "Survey Report on Citizens' Internet Use-2021" by the Communications Regulatory Commission of Mongolia claimed that 71% of all internet users use it to get information and 45.1% to search for information.

In 2022, totally 87 accredited higher education institutions including universities, institutes, and colleges, were operating in Mongolia. One of the criteria for higher education institutions to be accredited at the national level is the way to disseminate information to the public, thus these higher education institutions make their official websites the main channel for information dissemination (Mongolian National Council for Education Accreditation, 2022).

Website has no boundaries and it is international. It makes a strong impact on the image of a university and it is a kind of identity or name card of the university. However, website can communicate longer messages than a name card, brochure or booklet. It is an effective way to reach and commence interaction with a potential client, and build relationship. Another advantage of a website is that it is 24/7 in touch and accessible to every corner of the world.

The ways that universities represent themselves on their websites can be in forms of words, ideas, images, situations, colors, meanings, objects, and symbols, each of

¹ Communications Regulatory Commission of Mongolia, 2018

which may contribute to discourse influenced by various contexts, such as culture, history, society, politics, and economics. Language, thus, both communicates and represents information. Such representation relies on who is using language and how language is deployed and operationalized (Wetherell, 2001). Once the main goal of university website marketing is to affect, attract and persuade prospective students, and disseminate information to a wider range of audiences, the language used to represent universities should be constitutive (creating, codifying and conveying a message) as well as constructive (shaping the meaning and the ways in which it is understood) (Fairclough, 1995).

In discourse, language is not only written or spoken, but also it can be visual elements of communication including images, signs, graphics, symbols, drawing and illustration. For some purposes, using visual elements and images is better than using words to convey message effectively as nowadays people prefer visual information to written information due to their busy time schedule. Images can express both the denotative and connotative meanings of a situation or an event, as well as most of them carry the same/similar meaning in different languages. However, according to Fairclough (2001) a message can be far more effective if a combination of visual and textual modes of language is used. In the discourse of university websites, image connects users to easy and unambiguous ideas, while textual passages connect them to authentic and trustworthy ideas. Thus, they have functionally different roles in discourse. In addition, the two forms may help them enhance their image and reputation.

Once there is no discourse independent from its context and culture, culture definitely influences website design and content including layout, navigation, visual aids, color and text pattern etc.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In line with increasing role of internet, universities are forced to have an official university website, which is one of the important marketing techniques in the digital world. Although websites provide all types of textual and visual information about universities, the quality and quantity of information should keep to the information equation without misinforming and misleading. According to researchers, university websites aim at establishing the university identity and prestige as well as serve as a platform of strengths and distinctions from other similar institutions.

As the competition to attract future students between universities increases, they face a bigger challenge to remodel their websites more market-based, fast-loading, easy to navigate, and with fresh and quality content. To keep up with this new trend, universities tend to use various marketing techniques such as advertising, branding, content marketing, influencer marketing etc. Although it is criticized that education is considered as ultra-commercial, this trend is unavoidable. It is true that some universities create a prestigious and popular image through “good” marketing,

disregarding academic quality. Hartley and Morphew (2008) claimed that in targeting potential customers, universities use the art of persuasion by accentuating their ranking, amenities, social life and athletic programs using traditional and modern marketing tools.

The recent research works have found that the common images on websites of top-ranking universities include student photos engaging in cultural and academic activities, department and faculty profiles, modern labs, students attending classes, using labs, discussing in small groups with lecturers whereas low-ranking universities tend to use images of alumni profiles, outdoor scenery, students in fitness center or parade, students doing volunteering work and student union. From this, it can be concluded that top universities consider their strengths their faculty, while lower-ranking universities use their students as their advantage.

Hartley and Morphew (2008)'s content analysis revealed the presence of six thematic areas that featured prominently in the view books of universities they had analyzed, namely 1) Institutional context/ campus features (great location, campus beauty, campus landmarks, diversity of the student body, use of technology), 2) Academics/faculty (curriculum/ majors, student/faculty interaction, low student/faculty ratio, change to study abroad), 3) Co-curricular opportunities (students having fun, students engaged in non-sports activities (e.g. clubs), varsity and intramural sports, residence life), 4) Admission and financial aid (admissions requirements, presence of financial aid/ scholarships, how to visit campus), 5) Value of an education (successful alumni, validation through external rankings or guidebooks), 6) Purpose of higher education (preparing students for a job, formative/ developmental).

A number of survey results have revealed that university website viewers are mostly interested in the information about admission criteria, application process, majors on offer, tuition fee, financial support, reputation, campus appearance and students clubs.

Very few studies have been carried out on website discourse of Mongolian universities, especially on exploring the language representation (textual and visual) reflected on their websites. Thus, we tried to make a contribution to fill this research gap. Before starting our research paper, we conducted a small-scale of survey on whether high school pupils had made a decision about universities they would study, and if so, how they made their choice. According to the result, 67% of future students started with an online research when they were trying to decide which university to attend. 54% of pupils, who had chosen their universities to study in the future, said a university's website was one of the factors having influenced their decision.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research method was applied to explore the language use and reflected discourse on the “HOME” page of the eight Mongolian university websites. The advantage of qualitative research approach is that it can be used to investigate in-depth textual and visual representation meaning. In other words, the study examined the texts, visual aids and associated content on the sample websites using content analysis method.

We chose top eight universities in the Top Universities/ Institution Rankings list by the “AD Scientific Index-2023”² as sample universities for this study. The descriptive analysis was done based on Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough, the interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice.

Table 1. A list of universities whose websites were used as samples.

	University name	Website
1	National University of Mongolia	https://www.num.edu.mn/
2	Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences	http://www.mnum.s.edu.mn/
3	Mongolian University of Life Sciences	https://muls.edu.mn/
4	University of the Humanities	https://humanities.edu.mn/
5	Mongolian University of Science and Technology	https://www.must.edu.mn/mn/
6	Ulaanbaatar State University	https://usu.edu.mn/
7	German Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology	https://www.gmit.edu.mn/
8	Khovd University	http://www.khu.edu.mn/

IV. FINDINGS

Through the analysis of the “Home” pages of the eight university websites, we observed that the universities mainly focused on their student and faculty successes, highlighted activities as news report, the numbers (and names) of the schools, departments, teachers and staff, students, international cooperation partners, and approved accreditation internationally and domestically. Apparently, all the universities in the study considered the achievements of their staff and students as a main tool for their reputation and prestige. Although all the “Home” pages in the sample were both in Mongolian and English, the Mongolian versions were analyzed in this study. The vision, mission, and values were typed in upper cases in large font size. Thus, they were another important means for the universities

to represent themselves, and they were rich in content and succinct in wording.

Three of the universities involved in the study displayed their history and chronology of events that had contributed to education field in Mongolia. The universities, especially with long history and distant past, tend to use their history as a means of both showing their prominence and status, and attracting more prospective students.

All the “Home” pages provided hyperlinks access to other pages on the university website, and names of them were concise consisting mostly one or two words such as *бүртгэл* (registration), *элсэлт* (admission), *хөтөлбөр* (programs), *мэдээ*, *мэдээлэл* (news) etc. They must have considered that people in the digital era preferred to get the information they needed in a quick and efficient way instead of reading lengthy and prolix information. Most of the “Home” pages had a search bar for programs and courses on offer.

Some “Home” pages, e.g., of the University of the Humanities and the National University of Mongolia, were rich in content and easy to use providing almost all the subpages and hyperlinks on-hand. But other “Home” pages, e.g., of the Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences, the information about the university was not readily given on it, so viewers must click on further hyperlinks.

In brief, the main content of the “Home” pages of the universities involved in this study was student-centered theme. All eight universities tried to illustrate themselves as they would make the door open for students to success and achievement. For example, on the “Home” page of the National University of Mongolia it was written “*NUM student The future of Mongolia*”.

The universities in the sample used their “Home” page as a field where they should point out what they think their advantages and distinctions were. Only the University of the Humanities put its research priorities on view on the “Home” page.

The visuals they used on their websites mainly comprised high-quality images, various typography, rotating images, banners, logos, favicons to make their websites more appealing and professional. The logo of each university was displayed on the top left corner with its name in large font size. The primary images on the “Home” page included photos of students working in modern labs and classrooms, or attending off-campus activities, as well as research conferences, award ceremonies, signing ceremonies for cooperation agreement, professional labs and equipment, interior and exterior of the university buildings, and lively campus scenery. They also used team photos of international projects such as Erasmus by the European Union to enhance their image. They all used triptychs with the fascinating titles, but you had to click further if you wanted detailed information about them.

² https://www.adscientificindex.com/university-ranking/?country_code=mn

For their websites, the universities in the sample chose the colour which aligned with their logos and brand. All the universities, excluding the Mongolian University of Life Sciences, chose 'blue' as their main (background) color. Historically, blue has been associated with the Mongolians as a symbol of the eternal, open sky, and Mongolia is also known as a country of blue sky. It symbolizes stability, inspiration and wisdom. The Mongolian University of Life Sciences, formerly known as the University of Agriculture, used 'green' as their website color, which may be related to the features of its programs and courses.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the main objective behind the visual and textual discourse on the university websites was to provide viewers with appealing information, thus attract prospective students. All the universities in the sample focused on pointing out their strengths on their "Home" page and the content was varying a little bit based on what they considered as their advantages. For example, the University of the Humanities emphasized their interdisciplinary research priorities on the "Home" page.

It can be concluded that university websites portrayed university life over-romanticized, and emphasized the promise of personal gain rather than "public benefit". In some websites, search engine was not so good when searching with key words, which meant viewers might not be able to find information they wanted.

From the survey, the universities were aware of importance of blending visual and textual form of language on their websites, so for their marketing purpose, they used both forms of language to keep their identity and convey the intended message. In today's fiercely competitive world, every university is making an effort to increase its share of customers and resources, as well as contribute to social development enlightening the nation. For this purpose, using both forms of language, visual and textual, on their websites might be highly efficient because websites are the main communication means for them.

The possibility to have two-way conversation in which one wants to get answers to his/her questions about the university immediately is another benefit for viewers.

In general, the texts and visual aids on the chosen websites for the survey tend to be informational and promotional in nature. In other words, all eight universities applied promotional discourse to advertise themselves.

This descriptive analysis reveals that all eight university websites gave the similar information with limited content on the "Home" page, such as registration, majors, environment etc, and some visual images were not related to the main topics that websites were communicating. This may leave the viewers uncertain and confused. Anyway, using language in context as their tool to represent themselves effectively on their websites, university will get many benefits.

VI. DISCUSSION

The university websites in Mongolia should be regularly assessed using commonly used international criteria, namely usability, accessibility, reputation and language discourse aspects. This evaluation process and its feedback may help universities adjust their website in accordance with rapid change in higher education field and changing behavior of customers.

After visiting a website, doing extra actions, like making a phone call to get more or detailed information or approaching to the university in person, is not good, thus having a clear, reliable, concise, and informative website is one of the criteria that a university further exists.

For further research of this kind, critical discourse analysis combined with quantitative research method should be useful.

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