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Promotional discourse in the websites of two Australian universities: A discourse analytic approach

Thi Van Yen Hoang¹ and Isolda Rojas-Lizana^{1*}

Abstract: This article shows how universities represent themselves through the use of language on their institutional websites. Specifically, it compares and contrasts how a long established university, the University of Melbourne and a young university, Macquarie University construct their institutional identities and build up a relationship with potential students. A three-dimensional framework developed by Fairclough is utilised for three stages of discourse analysis. The analysis reveals that the websites of the two universities exhibit a promotional discourse which reflects the impacts of globalisation and the trend of academic marketing on higher education. This type of discourse is utilised by the universities to promote themselves in order attract more students and other resources. A comparison and contrast of the two university websites show that the representation of the two universities is not only determined by the social trends, but also their own tradition and reputation.

Subjects: Language & Linguistics; Applied Linguistics; Discourse Analysis

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; promotional discourse; Australian universities



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Institutional websites have been used as effective tools for universities to represent and market themselves. Large amount of resources have been dedicated to creating and maintaining the websites. In an effort to build up a distinctive image and leave a memorable impression on the audience, the universities have utilised language not only as a means of information, but also as a tool for representation. With the view of discourse as a social practice, Fairclough (2001) has developed three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis. This framework studies the linguistic elements of the text, the social factors determining the construction and interpretation of the text, and the social effects of the text. This study utilises this framework to study the discourse on the websites of two Australian universities, Melbourne and Macquarie, focusing on the way they construct their institutional identity and build up a relationship with potential students.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

Universities utilise language not only as a means of information, but also as a tool for representation. Through institutional websites, universities attempt to build up a distinctive image and market themselves toward the public and potential students. Nowadays, together with the explosion of the Internet, institutional websites are becoming more and more important to both universities and potential students. They are used to communicate a significant amount of information to a huge number of audiences in a rapid way (Anctil, 2008) and serve as the first, if not only, impression of the universities for potential students (Saichaie, 2011). Many students consider visiting institutional websites as their first visit to the universities and they are greeted with a “digital handshake” through an online campus tour (Anctil, 2008). For universities, institutional websites are not only their representative images, but also their admission tools. Eighty-four per cent of potential students report using them to do research and find information about universities (Anctil, 2008), which indicates the prominent role of institutional websites on students’ process of choosing universities.

However, universities deal with a high level of isomorphism, which is a constraint on one unit in a population to operate like other units that have similar environmental conditions (Hawley, 1986). This creates a competition among organisations that produce similar services or products for resources and customers. Like other organisations in contemporary global society, most universities compete for customers (i.e. students) and resources (i.e. funding); that is, they offer knowledge as a saleable commodity, just like Lyotard predicted in *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984). In order to have a competitive advantage, universities need to create a distinctive image, differentiating themselves from other universities. On the other hand, higher education is largely an intangible product. If universities wish to introduce their “products” to the customers, they need more concrete evidence to support their claim (e.g. logo, slogan, images, words). Thus, institutional websites are utilised as a primary outlet for universities to introduce their “products” to their customers and language as a strategic tool for them to achieve their goal. Given the importance of institutional websites to both universities and potential students, there is a lack of research investigating the language used by universities on their websites.

As a social phenomenon, language is situated in society and also creates society. Language shows “social effects of texts and on texts” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 141). In the competition for students and scarce resources, universities have adopted free market practices in running schools (Kwong, 2000). This process, which is called “academic marketing” (Litten, 1980), has affected various levels of university practice (Ashburn, 2010). Particularly, the discourse which is mostly known from the corporate world has affected the discursive practices of universities (e.g. prospectuses and websites) (Connell & Galasinski, 1998). Although universities adopt this type of discourse to market themselves to the public, including potential students, limited research has been done to examine this type of language.

Until now, research examining the discourse of university websites that incorporates the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) remains limited. This is the first time such a study is conducted in the context of Australia. The study is expected to bring the readers an insight into higher education in Australia—the world’s third largest provider of higher educational service, just behind the United States and the United Kingdom (Education at a glance 2011, 9/2011).

1.2. Purpose and limitations of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how two Australian universities represent themselves in response to social changes through the use of language on their institutional websites. The study also aims to compare and contrast how a long established and prestigious university, the University of Melbourne and a much younger university, Macquarie University represent themselves on their websites in connection with their institutional identities and relationships with potential students.

Visual elements (e.g. logos, images, videos) play a significant role on the representation of universities; however, this study only focuses on the written discourse of university websites. Future research can focus on both textual and visual representation and cover a larger number of universities in order to have a broader view of the discourse of Australian higher education.

2. Literature review

There are five parts in this section. Section 2.1 discusses globalisation and its effects on higher education. Section 2.2 reviews academic marketing. Section 2.3 looks at the role of institutional websites on admission and recruitment practices of universities. Section 2.4 summarises the theory of CDA. The final part reviews CDA studies examining the language of university websites.

2.1. Globalisation and higher education

The term “globalisation”, as used in this article, broadly refers to “all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society” (Albrow & King, 1990, p. 7). Globalisation has had significant impacts on every aspect of social life, including higher education. There is a pressure for the higher education sector to make necessary changes in order to be more adaptable in a globalised society. On the other hand, in a rapidly changing and intensively competitive global world, universities may easily fall into obsolescence. In an attempt to stay relevant and competitive, universities have formed alliance with universities worldwide and shape global identities (Teo, 2007).

Globalisation also leads to “a process of rethinking the social, cultural, and economic roles of higher education and their configuration in national system of higher education” (Enders & Fulton, 2002). Universities around the world adopt more businesslike and entrepreneurial approaches (Wernick, 1991) in their practices and focus on being responsive to “customer” (including current and potential students, staffs, supporters and investors). Fairclough (2010, p. 141) states that “institutions of higher education come increasingly to operate as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to customers”. In fact, there has been increasing “pressure for academics to see students as ‘customers’” (Fairclough, 2010), and as such make necessary adjustments to meet “customers” needs. Higher education has thus become a globally traded commodity (Morgan, 2010). This drives universities to compete for “customers” and offer them the best products. In this way, not only how they represent, but also position themselves in relationship with the public, potential students and staff, and investors has to and must change.

2.2. Marketisation of higher education

The marketisation of higher education is defined as the adoption of commercial enterprises practices in running schools by higher education institutions (Kwong, 2000). This phenomenon was not popular in the past when the universities used to get government support that did not require them to compete for students and prestige. In fact, the term “marketization of higher education” is introduced to account for the new order of the day within higher education, where cut down in government funding has forced universities worldwide to search for alternative sources of support and reconsider their reasons for being (Ashburn, 2010). As a result, universities now put more emphasis on attracting fee-paying students, compete for government research grants, develop marketable “product”, while focus less on traditional civic mission of higher education as teaching great thinkers, human development and creating “non-utilitarian” knowledge (Ashburn, 2010).

Nowadays, the marketisation of universities has gained its popularity in higher education and has become a strategic tool at various levels of university practice (Ashburn, 2010). At the behavioural level, universities worldwide have adopted “free market practices” in running schools, such as “cutting down production cost”, “abandoning goods not in demand”, “producing only popular products” and “advertising products to increase sales and the profit margin” (Kwong, 2000). At the discourse level, the discourse known from the corporate world has affected higher education discursive practices. As a result, terms like “customers”, “clients”, “markets”, “corporate identity”, “mission statements”, “strategic plans” have been found in university discourse (Connell & Galasinski, 1998).

Two traditional ways that universities used to market themselves are brochures and mission statements. A brochure is a type of small magazine that contains pictures and information on a product or a company (Cambridge, 2011). Brochures serve as a significant marketing vehicle for universities, even when Internet is so popular nowadays. Brochures can capture moments of universities that websites cannot due to their ever-changing nature (Hartley & Morpew, 2008). However, there is limited research on university brochures. The study by Hartley and Morpew (2008) states that brochures of universities in the United States make universities seem like “idyllic heavens” romanticising university life. Universities do not demonstrate an attempt to differentiate themselves from others through language use in their brochures. Similarly, Durgin (1998) reported that potential students cannot identify universities just based on language because universities adopt similar textual representations.

A mission statement is a description of the aims of a business, charity, government department or a public organisation (Cambridge, 2011). Like brochures, the research on university mission statements remains limited. The studies by Morpew and Hartley (2006), and Taylor and Morpew (2010) on mission statements of US universities gain similar findings. The language of mission statements reflects the type of universities (public versus private). The way universities represent themselves through mission statements is “normative and political” (Morpew & Hartley, 2006) and their use of general terms fail to construct universities’ distinctive identities as well as their focuses.

2.3. Institutional websites and higher education

Institutional websites have become essential in the admission and marketing practices of universities. For potential students, visiting institutional websites have become a norm and many consider visiting university websites as their first visit to the university itself (Anctil, 2008). The research suggests that 60–70% of university websites’ access come from external visitors, with potential students among primary visitors (McCollum, 1999). Eighty-four per cent of potential students report using institutional websites to find information about universities (Anctil, 2008). In addition, institutional websites are the place for universities to represent and market themselves in order to create a distinctive identity and leave a memorable impression on the audience, including potential students (Ashburn, 2010; Hossler, Smith, & Vesper, 1999). Due to the significant roles of institutional websites on admission and marketing practices, large amounts of resources have been dedicated to creating and maintaining websites. According to Schneider and Bruton (2004), annual institutional spending of the US universities on website design and maintenance ranged from tens of thousands to millions of dollars.

Given the significance of institutional websites for both prospective students and higher education institutions, a dearth of scholarship exists. Pooch and Lefond (2003) reports that content is the primary reason for students’ access to websites. Students rely on institutional websites for financial information much more than any other resources and a large number of students visit specific websites for basic information about financial aid (Venegas, 2006). Hossler et al. (1999) suggest that information about academic reputation, admission, programmes and courses, financial aid, and campuses get students interested most. The study by Kittle and Ciba (1997) reveals that universities, right from their early use of institutional websites for admission practices, were highly conscious about their representation. Universities also demonstrated their efforts to construct a relationship with potential students through application, faculty and tours sections.

2.4. Critical discourse analysis

CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice, suggesting an internal and dialectical relationship between language and society (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 1993). Whatever people speak or write are socially determined and have social effects. The ways in which people use language are not only determined by social relationships, but also help to maintain those relationships. Viewing discourse as a form of social practice, Fairclough (2013) distinguishes text from discourse: text is a product, while discourse is a process.

This process includes the process of production, of which text is a product, and interpretation, for which the text is a resource. Text analysis is just a part of discourse analysis, which consists of the analysis of productive process and interpretative process. This involves interplay between properties of text and social knowledge that people draw upon when they produce and interpret texts.

Based on that, Fairclough (2013) developed a three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis, corresponding to three dimensions of discourse (textual, process and societal). This framework describes three stages of CDA. The description stages focus on linguistic elements of the text. The interpretation stage studies the text's production and consumption, focusing on factors used to construct and interpret text. The final stage tries to explain the broad social contexts that are affecting the text being studied. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework is an effective research tool for studying discourse as it explores it in its social context and helps to uncover ideology and power relations. It is considered among the essential methodologies in the area of CDA and its applicability has been tested in many studies analysing different settings (Kheirabadi & Moghaddam, 2012; Kwauk, 2012; Shi, 2011).

2.5. CDA studies on university websites

There is a dearth of studies examining institutional websites in the light of CDA. The study by Chiper (2006) investigates how Romanian universities represent themselves on their institutional websites and then compares the discourse of Romanian universities with that of higher institutions in UK, France, Germany and Italy. The findings of the study reveal that the discourse of Romanian universities is affected by social change. The upcoming integration into the European Union led to the introduction of promotional discourse as is generalised as a discursive tool for universities (Chiper, 2006). The universities communicate with the public in the same manner as the enterprises and they managed to create an image of professionalism. When comparing the discourse of Romanian universities with that of other European Union countries, the author noticed that it is strongly affected by the European Union discourse; however, factors of local culture still remained. The discourse of young universities was conversational in style and universities attempt to nurture a relationship with potential students. Meanwhile, the discourse of older universities was "dry, official, conservative, and opaque" and the language use aimed at creating "homogeneity".

Saichaie (2011) examined how US colleges and universities of different control type, geographic location and admission selectivity represented themselves textually and visually on their institutional websites. The findings indicated that colleges and universities utilise promotional discourse, which indicates the growth of consumerism in higher education. Three themes emerging from this type of discourse were: similarity, uncertainty and control. The institutions were similar in their representations, even though they differed in terms of type, control, geographical location, etc. This may confuse viewers because they cannot differentiate one from the others. The theme of "uncertainty" was also found as there was limited amount of content directly related to financial aid. The vague and indirect representation demonstrates the control of the institution over the discourse on their institutional websites as they can choose what to present, emphasise and exclude (Saichaie, 2011).

3. Research questions

Two specific research questions that emerged from this study are:

- (1) How do the University of Melbourne and Macquarie University represent themselves through the use of language on their institutional websites?
- (2) What are similarities and differences in the way these universities construct their institutional identities and relationships with potential students?

4. Methodology

4.1. Data collection

The data of this study was collected from the websites of two Australian universities: the University of Melbourne and Macquarie University. Australia is one of the most well-known destinations of higher education in the world. In 2009, over one in five (22%) tertiary students in Australia was an international student (OECD, 2011). Two specific universities [the University of Melbourne (UM) and Macquarie University, (MU)] were chosen for their contrastive nature, UM has a long history and has achieved high reputation in the country and the world, while MU is early in its existence and is on the track of becoming one of Australia's leading universities.

The data collection covered two months (August–September 2012) and focused on the three following pages of UM and MU websites:

- (1) The Home page (<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/>, <http://mq.edu.au/>).
- (2) The About Us page (<http://www.mq.edu.au/about/profile/>; <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/about/>).
- (3) The Future Student page (<http://futurestudents.unimelb.edu.au/>; http://www.mq.edu.au/future_students.php).

These three pages were chosen because they are the most visited by potential students (Hossler et al., 1999). The Home page gives students the first impression of the university. The About page is the place where the viewers can explore the history, organisation and tradition of the university. The Future Student page provides potential students with all information about programmes and courses, admission and financial aid.

4.1.1. *The University of Melbourne*

Established in 1853, the University of Melbourne (UM) is the second oldest university in Australia and ranked among the top universities in Australia and the world. UM has research strengths in arts, humanities and biomedicine (Australian-Universities, 2011). The university is a member of the Group of Eight, Association of Pacific Rim Universities, and Universitas 21 (Melbourne). There are 40,000 students and 6,000 staff members at the University of Melbourne, many of whom are winners of prestigious awards (Australian-Universities, 2011). In recent years, the number of international students at the University of Melbourne has expanded from 2,000 in 1996 to 8,000 in 2006. Recently, a reform programme focusing on three core activities (research, learning and knowledge transfer) has been launched with the aims to make UM reach a higher position in the world ranking and its degrees have international relevance with US and European universities. The university is located in Melbourne, the capital and the most populous city in the state of Victoria and the second most populous city in Australia.

4.1.2. *Macquarie University*

Unlike Melbourne, Macquarie (MU) is a much younger university with a history of 45 years of existence. It was established in 1967, more than a century later than the University of Melbourne. However, the university is now claimed as a modern, sophisticated and cosmopolitan leading provider of education in Australia (Australian-Universities, 2011). The University had over 29,000 students enrolled throughout 2003, including 5,944 international students, from over 87 countries, studying onshore and 1,026 studying offshore (Australian-Universities, 2011). Innovation combined with commitment to excellence has resulted in recognition for the university in a range of areas. It was ranked at 8th–9th nationally and 201st–300th internationally by 2012 Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World universities (Australian-Universities, 2011). The university is located in Sydney, the state capital of New South Wales and the most populous and famous city in Australia.

4.2. Data analysis

Through a close study of language, it is possible to not only describe and interpret representation, but also to explain the formation of relationship, process and structure that affects individuals (Fairclough, 2013). Adopting CDA, this study describes linguistic features of the text on the two websites of two universities; interpret the social factors contributing to the process of text production and interpretation; and explain the effects the text may have on social structure and relationships.

This study utilises the three-dimensional framework developed by Fairclough (2013) to study the discourse on the websites of UM and MU (see Section 2.4). This framework corresponds to three stages of CDA. The first stage describes linguistic features of the texts of UM and MU websites. The second stage interprets the texts production and consumption. The final stage explains the effects of texts on society and relationship between the universities and the public.

5. Analysis

This study aims to investigate how a long-established, prestigious university, the University of Melbourne (UM) and a younger one, Macquarie University (MU) represent themselves on their institutional websites. The analysis focuses on three pages: the Home page, About Us page and Future Student page. A comparison on the way these two universities construct their institutional identities and relationship with potential students is also explored.

5.1. Description of the Home page

The Home page is the place where UM and MU attempt to construct their identities through visual elements (e.g. logo, slogan, images, videos) and leave a memorable impression on the viewers. The Home page also serves as a billboard for universities to announce recent achievements and upcoming events. At the forefront of UM Home page is the sentence “Welcome to the No. 1 University in Australia”. This is not only a welcoming sentence, but also a reputation claim. Next, the question “Thinking about Graduate Research at Melbourne?” underscores its research strength (Australian-Universities, 2011). And the phrase “\$100,000 Basil Sellers Art Prize” shows off its recent accomplishment as well as its strength in the field of arts (Australian-Universities, 2011).

Meanwhile, MU promotes itself as “Australia’s best modern university” on the Home page. The “Green Lifestyle Awards” is a concrete evidence for its strength in environmental science and supports the motto of “modern” (using at the common meaning of the word) because environment is one of current global issues. In addition, the presence of social networking connections (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) on MU Home page continues to promote the image of a “modern” university. A video about the MU’s Campus Overview provides convincing evidence about a “modern” university with images of newly built buildings and newly equipped facilities.

5.1.1. Interpretation

In terms of discursive practice, the MU and UM Home pages exhibit a promotional discourse through which they attempt to build up identities and enhance prestige in order to attract students and other resources. The discourse of promotion is common in contemporary culture which has even been characterised as a “promotional” or “consumer” culture. This is present in the home page of Melbourne and Macquarie websites. The process of marketisation and commodification has generalised promotion as a communicative function in society and discourse serves as “a vehicle for ‘selling’ goods, services, organizations, ideas or people” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 138)

The generalisation of promotion has consequences on the contemporary order of discourse. Firstly, there is a re-establishment of boundaries between orders of discourse and between discursive practices (Fairclough, 2010). For example, the genre of consumer advertising has colonised the professional and public service order of discourse, generating many new hybrid partly promotional genres (Fairclough, 2010). In this case, the home pages of UM and MU website have been strongly affected by the advertising genre, resulting in the adoption of promotional discourse. The

universities advertise themselves as “The No. 1” (UM) and “Best” (MU) universities in Australia. The home pages also provide the universities’ social networks connections (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) that can be commonly found in nowadays advertisements.

Secondly, there is a widespread instrumentalisation of discursive practices for instrumental effects (Fairclough, 2010). The Home page of UM and MU shows a manipulation of interpersonal meaning, which is called “synthetic personalization” (Fairclough, 2010) It includes personal pronouns to simulate a personal relationship with the readers, even though the website is an example of mass communication. For example, “Access Melbourne-Your future is waiting for you” (UM), is a discursive strategy for personalising addressing the readers directly (Dann, 1996/2001). The home page is also featured by imperative clauses, such as “Take your career to the next level” (MU); “Fast track your degree this summer” (MU). The imperative mood is normally used to express a command (Downing & Locke, 1992). However, in this case, it is an “attention-seeking device” known from promotional and advertising discourse (Ashburn, 2010) and used as a friendly and direct call for action. In addition, there are elements from the genre of corporate advertising to persuade the customers to buy the product: “Let Australia’s number 1 modern university help take your career to the next level” (MU), where the university is personified as a companion who understands and supports customers in their quests for their own values in their life as well as their career (Luu, 2010). This statement is supported by the image of a lift evoking an upward movement, which connects to the cognitive metaphor that “up” is “good” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Thirdly, the most profound feature of promotional culture is the shift in the relative salience of different semiotic modalities (Fairclough, 2010). For example, there is an increasingly greater dependence on visual elements to express meaning than verbal ones (Fairclough, 2010). The home pages of UM and MU utilise a great deal of visual aids (e.g. logo, images, videos) as tangible evidence to shape their identities and leave memorable impression on the viewers. For example, the claim “Australia’s best modern university” on the Home page of MU is supported by the image of a newly set up building which would impact on viewers’ idea of modernity (continuous infrastructure improvement).

5.2. Description of the About Us page

The About Us page is the place where institutions introduce themselves to the viewers, including potential students, staffs, parents, researchers and supporters. By focusing on their history and reputation, the universities try to construct their national and global relevance and market their “products” to potential students. UM and MU have different ways to construct their images based on their geographical, historical and socioeconomic backgrounds. The University of Melbourne underscores its “world class education” and their graduates can “work anywhere in the world” (UM) with “internationally recognized degrees” (UM). Meanwhile, Macquarie takes its “contemporary outlook” (MU) and its location in “one of the largest business and technology precincts in the southern hemisphere” (MU) as strengths to market itself.

5.2.1. Interpretation

Similar to the Home page, the About Us page contains promotional discourse where UM and MU enhance their reputation and construct their national and international relevance. Pictures and videos continue to be used as tangible evidence for UM and MU to construct their images. Once again, the universities try to develop a relationship with the public and prospective students by using the personal pronouns “we” and “you” (e.g. “We continue to develop stronger relationships with our alumni, donors and other supporters who want to see Macquarie continue to flourish” (MU); “These are the kind of people you want to learn from” (UM)). The words “The University of Melbourne”, “Melbourne”, and collocations, such as “Melbourne degree”, “Melbourne curriculum”, “Melbourne experience” are repeated more than 20 times on the UM’s page as a strategy to construct the viewers’ awareness of the brand Melbourne (Fairclough, 2010). UM also emphasises its “globalness” by a

range of synonyms “international”, “world class”, “world-wide” (UM). This is evidence of the pressure of globalisation on higher education, calling these institutions for nurturing new relationship and shaping new identities (see Section 2.1). Here, universities attempt to claim their international relevance by promoting the image of a global university.

The discourse also contains emotive and evaluative adjectives which are popularly seen in advertisements “great”, “best”, “highest”, “biggest”, “largest”, “fantastic”, “up-to-date”, “cost-effective” (UM) and “outstanding”, “excellent”, “high-tech”, “exceptional” “leading” (MU). The verbs “produce”, “offer”, “cater”, “bring”, “provide”, “equip” (UM and MU) place institutions as sellers, as all of them evoke a giving action, and potential students as customers. This reflects the pressures of marketisation on the higher education sector, which make universities “operate as ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to customers” (Fairclough, 2010) and the institutional websites now functioning as “vehicle” for universities to promote their products.

The discourse of the About Us page focuses on describing what universities are and do. Accordingly, sentences are mostly in the active voice and the verbs are in the material and relational processes (e.g. “**University of Melbourne is** the highest placed Australian university in three of the four major world rankings” (UM); “**Macquarie University is** on track to becoming one of Australia’s leading research universities” (MU); “**The Melbourne curriculum provides** our students with a uniquely Melbourne experience” (UM). (All emphasis added to the examples are the authors’). This foregrounds the idea that universities are actively at the centre of discourse.

5.3. Description of the Future Student page

The Future Student page provides potential students with important information about programmes and courses, admission, financial aid and scholarships. However, there is an overlap of information on this page as the universities once again market themselves to prospective students. This might be due to the fact that potential students are more likely to look at this page than the About Us page during their university choice process. The universities seem to be now in a dilemma where they wish to persuade students to come to the university and also show their authority over them.

5.3.1. Interpretation

A promotional discourse is once again utilised by UM and MU to persuade potential students to choose the universities. Rankings and fact numbers about universities are provided, which is a discursive strategy used to persuade the readers about the “objectivity” and trust of information. Rankings have become parts of the process of university recruitment internationally (topuniversities, 2012). The key thing about university rankings is their combination of authority, simplicity and worldwide publicity, which makes them very seductive (topuniversities, 2012). In addition, using statistics is a common feature of commercials to appeal to a specific audience as why they should purchase the product (Rodgers, 1952). Rankings are considered one of the indicators of the quality that may provide valuable information for potential students’ university choice process (Horstschräer, 2012), although it has been suggested that the ranking systems used in higher education need revision and improvement. In a competitive market, university rankings also try to identify themselves within that market. The University of Melbourne claims its position in a variety of world rankings (e.g. Academic Ranking of World Universities, Times Higher Education World University Rankings, QS World University Rankings, The Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings) in order to shape its global identity and construct its international relevance.

A similarity in language use by these two universities has been found. Both universities position themselves as top universities in Australia and in the world with similar lexicon such as “top, only, best, greatest, excellence, unique, global, international, renowned, real-life, interdisciplinary” (UM and MU). However, there is vagueness in the way they claim their rankings. For instance, Macquarie claims being ranked in “top two per cent of universities globally” without specifying the exact position and the name of the ranking. Another aspect that marks ambiguity is the financial section, as

both universities claim to be “generous” in the scholarship area: “Macquarie University has one of the most **generous** scholarship programs in the country” (MU) and “The Melbourne Scholarships Program is one of the most **generous** and comprehensive in Australia” (UM).

The Future Student page also included staff and student testimonials. A testimonial consists of a written or spoken statement from a well-known figure or a private citizen who praises the virtues of a product or service. Testimonials are commonly used in promotion or advertising to create a sense of authenticity and trust (Ashburn, 2010). In this case, staffs and students share their personal experience at the university. The strategy of using personal experience has several functions and effects. First, it enhances the credibility of an argument given by the university in the words of people “who would know” what the prospective student wants as they are themselves students. Second, personal experience is validated in a “witness” capacity, replacing the idea of “bias” with the authoritative idea of “life expertise” (Rojas-Lizana, 2011). In their testimonials, students emphasise the wide variety of things that the university offer. It is not only programmes, courses, facilities, but also real life experience:

Macquarie’s location and cultural diversity makes it a great “door” to doing business in Asia. My experience so far has been great - the Australian learning culture gives you professional knowledge, but also with an attitude that learning is fun. (MU)

These examples show that these universities are indeed using promotional discourse to advertise their “products” to potential students. The “products” on offer are not only courses and study programmes, but all the “extras”—that is, an exciting experience, friendly atmosphere, beautiful campus and first-class facilities (Ashburn, 2010).

Even though the universities aim to construct a friendly relationship with prospective students through a conversational style with personal pronouns (“we”, “you”), colloquial language and direct questions (e.g. “Don’t worry; Now is the time to do that; Need somewhere to stay until long-term housing available? Have you planned well enough to make it through your whole course?” (UM and MU)), they also mark their authority over the students, especially in Entry Requirements and Application Process sections. The use of imperative mood expresses commands or requests over potential students. For example,

Find out more about early offers (UM).

Use the course search above or browse our study program to find the course that is suitable for you (UM).

Remember that the places are limited in all programs (MU).

By using the modal verb “must”, UM explicitly imposes obligation toward prospective students:

You must **meet** the English language requirements of the University to be eligible for a place (UM).

In order to meet the requirements you **must** fulfil one of the options below (UM).

All students applying for a course at the University of Melbourne **must** satisfy the entry requirements for that course (UM).

In contrast, MU chooses a less explicit and overt way to demonstrate their authority. Indicative mood is used more often than the imperative, but it still successfully expresses requirements that the universities give for students. This linguistic feature will be further discussed in the next point (4.4) as it reveals the difference in the representation of UM and MU:

To apply for a Masters (research) or PhD program, you **should be able** to demonstrate research experience in your previous studies (MU).

All international students at Macquarie **are required** to provide evidence of proficiency in English (MU).

Students who would like to apply for the above programs **need** to achieve higher English language requirements as outlined below (MU).

The frequent use of modal verbs such as “may”, “can” by both UM and MU shows their concern toward students’ rights and choices. For example,

You **can** satisfy the English language requirements in a number of ways depending on your circumstances (UM).

You **can** apply online direct to the University, or via mail (UM).

You **may** still apply for entry and your application will be assessed by our admissions team (MU).

According to Fairclough (2010), the avoidance of explicit obligation expression is a feature of promotional discourse. This demonstrates a marked shift in the authority relations between universities and potential students as promotional discourse positions potential students as “customers”. And customers would have more options in choosing “academic products”. As mentioned above, the Future Students page poses a dilemma for universities who wish to promote themselves, but still want to impose entry requirements and conditions on potential students. However, the universities have resolved this textual dilemma by presenting requirements in an implicit and less overt way.

5.4. Contextual analysis: comparison

This part will compare and contrast the way a long-established university (UM) and a much younger one (MU) textually represent themselves on their websites. The focus will be on how they construct their institutional identities and relationships with potential students.

5.4.1. Institutional identity construction

In terms of identity construction, it is observed that the University of Melbourne constructs itself as the subject in a number of sentences, while students are rarely found at the subject position. For example,

From this perspective alone, **Melbourne** is a great choice (UM).

The University of Melbourne is proud to lay claim to one of the oldest and largest academic libraries in Australia (UM).

The University of Melbourne is a beautiful campus that combines contemporary architecture and sustainable design with historic sandstone buildings (UM).

Melbourne has around 135 exchange partners in over 32 countries around the world (UM).

Melbourne also produces and is associated with scholars of truly international standing (UM).

The focus of the discourse is on the university, with little emphasis on students. In fact, apart from the photographs and videos, it is hard to see images of students. It is worth noticing the metonymic use of “Melbourne” in the discourse of UM. The word “Melbourne” is sometimes used alone, which gives the idea that this university is the most important university in Melbourne and an important icon of that city. Even at the Future Student page where the focus should be on the students, the

university largely utilises the discourse to promote itself. The overall impression of the UM's website is that the university places itself at the centre of the discourse as an authority and that students have a secondary role.

In contrast, we can see a wider variety of subjects, including students, programmes and information in the discourse of Macquarie University. Here are some examples:

The program is also suitable for accounting graduates with a degree from an overseas university, who are seeking postgraduate qualifications in accounting (MU).

Studying at Macquarie University will give you a highly regarded degree which is: academically rigorous, well-rounded, flexible and practical (MU).

Our graduates consistently rank higher in grade results in the CPA program than non-Macquarie graduates (MU).

The information is also presented in dot points, rather than a paragraph, to minimise the appearance of the university at the subject of the sentences and to create an impression of dynamism. For example,

Macquarie at a glance

- Australia's number 1 modern university, offering internationally recognised and respected degrees
- multi-billion dollar investment in facilities and infrastructure, including the most high-tech university library in Australia
- Australia's most technologically advanced hospital, including the country's only gamma knife for leading-edge treatment of brain cancer
- a campus in one of the largest business and technology precincts in the southern hemisphere, creating a hub of innovation and excellence
- a 126-hectare park-like campus protected by our award-winning sustainability practices

Unlike Melbourne, Macquarie University gives more voice and hence identity to students through testimonials. This is not only a promotional strategy to create a sense of impartiality and trust of information, but also to make the discourse more participative and student-centred. This is a characteristic attributed to negotiation in a modern setting. The notion of being "modern" is again supported through its claims of core values. A university in a modern setting is not only an authoritative organisation offering professional training, but also a companion, which is friendly, attentive and responsive to social changes.

We are **creative** in our response to opportunities and challenges (MU).

We are inclusive. Inclusiveness is about making the system fairer and providing access to everyone, no matter what their background, who has potential to benefit from higher education (MU).

We are agile. Agility is our willingness and our ability to be responsive, to listen and act, and not to be bound to traditional approaches where these are no longer relevant to the student of today (MU).

We are friendly. Friendliness is an important characteristic in a university. Our academics and professional staff are accessible and informal in their interactions with students (MU).

We are **contemporary** in our outlook, in the way we communicate, in the way our staff and students interact (MU).

As mentioned in Section 2.1, under pressure of globalisation, universities have no choice but to construct their global identities in order to compete with others. Both UM and MU construct their “globalness” through “world class education” (UM), “international opportunities” (UM) or “global outlook” (MU), “internationally recognized and respected degree” (MU). However, differences are still found in their representations due to their different backgrounds. Melbourne aims for an international standing, whereas Macquarie, knowing that they cannot yet compete with older universities, concentrates on constructing its national relevance. This is demonstrated in their wording in the Profile section (the About Us page). Melbourne uses the phrase “International profile”, which gives the viewers a sense that they are going to read about an international standing university. Meanwhile, MU’s “University profile” does not leave any special impression. Here is the introduction of UM’s profile:

When choosing a university in which to earn your degree, you want to know that at the end of your study, you can work anywhere in the world (UM).

Melbourne constructs the identity of potential students as “active global citizen”, who have “global experience”, “international outlook” and “can work anywhere in the world”. Meanwhile, Macquarie introduces itself in its university profile as:

Macquarie University is on track to becoming one of Australia’s leading research universities (MU).

MU does not tell much about its international standing, but emphasises its status within Australia. It is “Australia’s best modern university”, “number one in environmental sciences and ecology research in Australia” and “recently named as the top university in Australia for research in environmental science and ecology based on the number of citations per researcher”. It has “the most high-tech university library in Australia”, “Australia’s most technologically advanced hospital”, “Australia’s best-established childhood education program”, “Australia’s No. 1 for environmental science and ecology research” and “The best space and equipment for media studies in Australia” (MU).

It is not difficult to understand the differences in the representation of UM and MU as they have different backgrounds. Melbourne has a history of 150-year existence, 114 years older than Macquarie. Its status and reputation has been established through a lengthy period. Meanwhile, Macquarie is still “on the track” (MU) of building up its reputation. For this, it emphasises that what it has achieved so far is recognisable, and demonstrates its tireless efforts.

5.4.2. Relationship construction

As mentioned early, the University of Melbourne seems to have adopted a relatively university-centred discourse, compared with the discourse of Macquarie University, which is more student-centred. By doing so, UM appears to create a bigger distance toward potential students and, at the same time, impose an authoritative figure. This relationship between the University and the students follows a formal pattern, in which students are constructed as passive recipients, rather than active agents in control of their educational experience. The spotlight is really the university and the authority they have over their students—an authority that has been created through a solid reputation and years of experience. Looking through the websites of UM, we can see that phrases like “The University of Melbourne” and “Melbourne” occupy most of the subject positions. For example, in the paragraph introducing about the university, there are 26 sentences in which “The University of Melbourne” and “Melbourne” are found at subject positions.

Meanwhile, Macquarie mostly addresses itself as “we” throughout the discourse, which constructs a same-level personal relation with the viewers/readers and also gives the idea that there is a team and teamwork constructing the university.

Moreover, we can see MU's attempt to downplay its authority by using less overt obligation expressions in the following example:

Each study program has specific entry requirements that you **need to** fulfil, in order to be considered for entry into the program (MU).

All international students at Macquarie are **required to** provide evidence of proficiency in English (MU).

With the same information, the University of Melbourne has a different way to express, which consequently creates an authoritative distance between the university and potential students:

Find the right course for you, and **make sure** you meet the entry requirement (UM).

All applicants **must** also meet the English language requirements of the University to be eligible to be offered a place (UM).

In summary, there are similarities and differences in the way the two universities represent themselves on their institutional websites, in terms of constructing institutional identity and interpersonal relations. Both universities construct their global identities as a response to the process of globalisation. However, while UM aims at an international status, MU focuses on its national relevance. In terms of interpersonal relationship, although both universities attempt to build up a relationship with potential students, the discourse on UM website is more university-centred, which creates a distance between university and students and promotes its authoritative image. Meanwhile, MU attempts to minimise the authority of the institution and give more voice to students with its discursive strategies. In the current context, where globalisation and marketisation have great impact on higher education, shaping global identities and nurturing a relationship with potential students are considered as essential strategies for universities to remain competitive and relevant. However, globalisation and marketisation are not the only factors that have effect on the representation of universities. In fact, the comparison between these two universities suggests that the institutional status and reputation have greatly influenced the way universities construct their identities and build up relationship with potential students. The older and prestigious university, the University of Melbourne, overtly asserts its authority over potential students by placing itself at the centre of discourse and displaying a vague image of potential students. As a result of the authority which has been achieved through a long history and high prestige, a top-down and distant relationship has been created between UM and its potential students. Meanwhile, MU, a young university, which is on the track of building up reputation and marketing brand maintains a friendly, modern and equal relationship with potential students:

We are **contemporary** in our outlook, in the way we communicate, in the way our staff and students interact (MU).

We are **friendly**. Friendliness is an important characteristic in a university. Our academics and professional staff are accessible and informal in their interactions with students (MU).

6. Discussion

In the last section, an analysis of the discourse on UM and MU websites revealed that a promotional discourse has been employed by the universities to promote their prestige in order to attract more students. In this section, the social factors affecting the discursive practices of the universities and their effects on society will be examined. The aim of this section is to discuss the “dialectical relationship” between discursive and social structures to show that “discourse is not only socially constituted but also socially constitutive” (Fairclough, 2013)

6.1. Discourse is socially constituted

The promotional discourse on the website of Melbourne and Macquarie universities is an example of academic marketing (see Section 2.2). The new realities of the twenty-first century have forced

universities to adopt techniques known from business practices (e.g. advertising, marketing) to remain competitive in the education marketplace. Australia is one of the first countries in the world to restructure its higher education from elite to a mass system. This change enabled wider participation in higher education and made it the world's third largest provider of higher education services (Australia, 2008; Margison, 2012). In the last two decades, higher education has become Australia's third largest export industry (Shah & Nair, 2011). International students make up a large portion in Australian higher education and make major contribution to Australian economy. However, Australian higher education has faced some problems in recent years. The government funding for universities has been cut down from 77% in 1989 to 44% in 2009 (Shah & Nair, 2011). Moreover, there is a decline in the number of international students coming to Australia in recent years due to changes in government policy related to skilled migration, international student visas as well as safety and security of international student (Shah & Nair, 2011). This may explain why Australian universities put more efforts into marketing themselves in order to win alternative sources of support and attract international fee-paying students who are their major source of income.

The discourse of UM and MU websites also reflects the process of globalisation which has affected every aspects of society, including higher education. Particularly, globalisation has put a pressure on higher education institutions to make necessary changes in order to be adaptable to a new globalised society. Under the pressures of globalisation, Australia has determined the role of higher education in society:

As the world becomes more interconnected and global markets for skills and innovation develop even further, it will be crucial for Australia to have enough highly skilled people able to adapt to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing future. (Australia, 2008, p. xi)

An analysis of the discourse of UM and MU websites reveals that both universities attempt to construct their global identities in order to stay relevant and competitive in a global world. However, UM and MU have different strategies in promoting themselves based on their status and reputation. A long history and high prestige allow UM reaching to an international status, while MU, with a newly established tradition, puts more emphasis on its national status.

6.2. Discourse is socially institutive

The discursive practices of UM and MU on their institutional websites may have impacts on social life, affecting the perceptions and expectation of the public and potential students about the roles of higher education and institutions. Higher education is seen as a service sector in Australia (Shah & Nair, 2011), in which higher education institutions are service providers and students are customers or clients. As service providers, these institutions are expected to be highly adaptable to social changes in order to provide their customers or clients with highest quality service. Especially, building up a higher education that is "responsive to unpredictable change on a global scale" (Australia, 2008) is considered a long-term vision for higher education in Australia.

The discursive practices of UM and MU not only restructure their institutional roles and identities as a response to social changes, but also restructure the relationship between universities and potential students. The trend of marketisation in higher education has created a need for universities to give up their traditional role as "gatekeepers" and consider themselves as "service-providers" in an increasingly competitive education marketplace (Teo, 2007). These changes have affected the discursive practices of universities; the authoritative and university-centric discourse has been replaced by a friendly and student-centric discourse, especially in the website of young universities who wish to claim their modernity and build up an intimate relationship in order to attract more students. As customers of higher education, students may have more options in choosing the product that best meets their demands. It can be said that, in the new world order, students choose their universities (Teo, 2007). This new trend contrasts with what happened in the past when universities were the "gatekeepers" and students had to take a very competitive entrance examination in order to be accepted by them.

On the other hand, the colonisation of the public service orders of discourse, such as the discourse on institutional websites by the genre of consumer advertising has ethical implications (Fairclough, 2010) Being constantly subject to promotional discourse, the audience is likely to face the question of trust. When the discourse is constructed with a promotional intention, how can the audience be sure of its authenticity? For example, to what extent positive adjectives like “great”, “best”, “fantastic”, “international” (UM) truly reflect the real situation or how can the audience be aware that a friendly statement, such as “Let Australia’s number 1 university help take your career to the next level” (MU), is stimulated for an instrumental effect. Even the way universities state their rankings on their institutional websites raises an ethical issue. Since rankings have become parts of the process of university recruitment internationally, they have to be carried out in an ethically engaged way (topuniversities, 2012).

As universities adopt a promotional discourse to market themselves, there is a similarity in their language use (see Section 4.2). This is a drawback of promotional discourse versus informational discourse (Fairclough, 2013), as readers may be unable to find the appropriate answer for their questions. In the case of the examples given here, potential students may be confused by the word “generous” in the scholarship section of both UM and MU.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how two Australian universities represent themselves through the use of language on their institutional websites. The study also compares and contrasts the way they construct their institutional identity and relationship with potential students. CDA has been selected to illuminate the social factors affecting the discourse and the effects it has on social structure and relationships. The study utilised the three-dimensional framework developed by Fairclough (2010) for discourse analysis and focused on three pages: the Home page, About Us page, and Future Students page.

The data analysis revealed that the websites of UM and MU exhibit a promotional discourse which is constructed to represent themselves and attract potential students. The universities use concrete evidence (e.g. logo, images, videos, testimonials, numbers, rankings) in order to shape their identities and enhance their reputation. They also attempt to build up a relationship with the public and potential students through a conversational style, in which the audience is personally addressed and the universities are personified as friendly companions. A comparison on the discourse of UM and MU websites suggests that both universities build up a global identity in order to persuade potential students of their international relevance and how they can prepare students for global workforce. However, the difference is that Melbourne puts emphasis on its international prestige, while Macquarie focuses more on its national relevance. The University of Melbourne also places itself at the centre of discourse, creating an authoritative distance between the university and students. In contrast, there is an attempt by Macquarie to downplay its own authority, foreground its modernity and put students in the centre of discourse. This reflects the different strategies adopted by these universities. As a long-established and top university in Australia, Melbourne gets out of the national boundary and reaches an international standing. Meanwhile, Macquarie, a newly established university, knowing that they cannot compete with others, chooses to focus on national standing and a friendly, personalised approach.

The analysis suggested that the discourse on university websites is strongly affected by social changes. The trend of academic marketing, together with alterations within Australian higher education system, such as the cut down of government funding and the decline in the number of international students in recent years, have forced Australian universities to seek strategies to make them more appealing towards investors and the public. On the other hand, globalisation urges universities to nurture new relationship and shape new identities in order to stay relevant and competitive. The variations in the discursive practices of universities have effects on social order and relationship. They may change people’s perceptions of the roles of higher education and universities as well as restructure the relationship between universities and the public.

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