

Academic Visual Identity of Higher Education Institutions: A Multimodal Communication through Pictorial Representations

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies on branding of higher education institutions have increasingly explored the notion of identity in the modern university context. The positive effects of brand communication, especially offline communication, may be well investigated, whereas few studies have analyzed how online brand communication can be realized. This study examines an under-discovered visual source, namely pictures, that performs a pivotal function to display the visual identity of Chinese universities. This study investigates the multimodal discourse of the ‘About Us’ web genre which employs pictures to portray the universities’ brand identity, and examines their meaning potentials. Drawing upon the visual grammar framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the sample for visual analysis in this study was collected from the ‘About Us’ webpages of nine elite Chinese universities (C9 League). Findings of the qualitative analysis indicate that pictures are ingeniously employed to display the virtual identity of the Chinese universities. The multifaceted brand identity of the universities may be projected through a heavy use of symbolic representations, along with a diversity of communication strategies to portray their representational meanings. The study provides information for universities to effectively use visual resources in constructing their brand identities and offering information to their target audience via the web-mediated multimodal discourses.

Keywords: Brand; Visual identity; Higher education; Pictures; Multimodal communication

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) target at creating non-utilitarian knowledge, engaging in the applied academic investigation, assisting the professional developments of their staff and the character development of their students (Reed, 2004). In the community of HEIs, universities specifically endeavor to create and implement new and innovative academic programs, increase quality education through offering courses, and cultivate students for their future careers (Atakan & Eker, 2007). As early as the 1970s, a new market revolution has swept into the higher education sector. The growing cost of education and the increased competition among HEIs both at home

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and abroad forced universities to adopt market-oriented strategies so as to differentiate themselves from their peers in the competition, with a purpose to attract more students (Butt & Rehman, 2010). Facing the vigorously increasing competitions, universities have been aware of the functions of building a positive identity as a powerful source of increasing a competitive advantage. In this regard, universities seek to differentiate themselves and thereby generate a competitive position via a combination of representing high-quality education and other social responsibilities (Atakan & Eker, 2007). Subsequently, universities worldwide became increasingly market-oriented and recognized the significance of establishing a strong university brand (Khoshtaria et al., 2020; Mourad et al., 2020; Vukasovič, 2015).

Marketing activities have since been adopted by HEIs with branding being of interest to academics and professionals (Farhat et al., 2021). Furthermore, universities' promotion practices and marketing activities do not only influence the stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, funding institutions), but also create and capitalize on a unique brand identity which is generally deemed as the result of branding communication. A brand is defined as a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014: 148). In other words, a brand is formally defined as a unique visual representation which captures the essence or the characteristics of an organization, for example, the brand of a university can be manifested in a diversity of visual artefacts of a university, such as its building architecture, websites, advertisements, etc. (Drori et al., 2013). A university's brand identity or image is concerned with students' associations to physical and intangible attributes of the university (Carvalho et al., 2021), which encompasses diversiform elements such as the particular geographical location and the country the university belongs to, and other attributes associated with brand personality (Shafaei et al., 2019), reputation (Dennis et al., 2016), tradition and history, prestige, as well as its ranking position (Mourad et al., 2020).

Most existing literature on the institutional identity construction of HEIs have been carried out from linguistic perspectives. The critical discourse approach to identity-related communication in higher education has been commonly used. These studies were aimed at displaying how the concept of brand and other sociocultural ideologies are constituted and reproduced by the discursive practices of HEIs in the genres of brochures (Osman, 2008), mission statements (Morrish & Sauntson, 2013), graduation ceremony (Han, 2014), presidents' messages (Teo & Ren, 2019), etc. Recent academic investigations increasingly prove that multimodal discourses and visual resources are significant components for HEIs to communicate their branding purposes and portray unique identities (Feng, 2019; Zhang & Tu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020).

VISUAL IDENTITY OF BRAND: CVI AND AVI

Identity refers to a socially constructed, emergent process that is concerned with a structured and symbolic discourse to suggest individual expertise and group membership. Authors or advertisers select a specific design, language, images, contents and links to recognize the conventions and behaviors of particular social groups and make a claim for a particular identity in these groups (Hyland, 2012). Previous visual studies have been heavily conducted on corporate visual identity (CVI). CVI refers to the 'way in which an organization uses logos, type styles, nomenclature, architecture and interior design, etc. to communicate its corporate philosophy and personality' (Balmer, 1995: 26). It is acknowledged as the most recognizable method for an organization to display itself. CVI is a mix of the visual identity and communication of the organizations, along with their philosophy, mission and values, which typically spreads across all areas of the

organizational operation. A well-designed CVI offers the organization with a powerful and visible image of quality (Idris & Whitfield, 2014). CVI is utilized as a communication mode that is the aggregate of visual sources, messages and media through which the corporations convey their uniqueness to the public. More specifically, it is a hybrid of the verbally or visually presented elements of a corporation/organization and includes its marketing communication intentions, corporate communication tools (e.g., annual reports) (van Riel, 1995). Corporate visual identity, as a strategy, has attracted growing attention from experts and practitioners in recent decades. By establishing an effective corporate identity, an organization is able to create understanding and commitment among its stakeholders. This can be mirrored in the ability to attract and retain customers and employees, fulfill strategic alliances, and get financial support. Branding as represented by the use of CVI has gradually increased its importance in the field of higher education. Nonetheless, it is generally viewed as more complicated than corporate branding, because the products of HEIs are intangible and universities include people whose attitudes, beliefs and values may vary dramatically. Therefore, a university's visual identity as corporate branding is seen to depend on the institutional culture to a larger extent rather than product-based corporate branding. The goal of universities' visual identity is to articulate their essence through clear and coherent messages, making every communication consistent with one official identity that they project (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Therefore, the identity of a university is influenced by its management and control, and is context-dependent and socially constructed (Steiner et al., 2013).

Academic visual identity (AVI) extends the concept of CVI to interact with the symbolic representation in the sector of education, in particular higher education institutions. AVI is realized by various symbolic artifacts, such as the institutions' logos, mottos, seals, shields, signage, stationery, tag lines, uniforms, viewbooks, videos, photos and websites. Furthermore, AVI refers to the complete set of "architectural, audiovisual, ceremonial, sartorial, print, and promotional artifacts that symbolically identify schools, colleges, and universities" (Masiki, 2011: 85). Especially for the new universities, it becomes more vital to build visually distinct identity profiles and reputations which not only attract students, but also attract faculty members in order to meet the universities' urgent requirement to employ individuals with high competence. The management of AVI can be just as much sociopolitical as operational. In terms of its changes, some universities underscore organizational cultures in that the cultural components of the change of an AVI need to be managed with as much care as the functional. The consensus around AVI can be difficult to achieve as there exist knowledge and value gaps between different cultures in a university (Baker & Balmer, 1997). Based on the fact that there is a high degree of shared meaning around all the perspectives of visual identity, CVI or AVI, academic leaders in the universities should be intimately familiar with the origins, symbolism, design rationale, and history of the strategic and graphic elements (e.g., photos, logos) used in their institution's brand communication. This will enable the universities to effectively create and use a variety of authentically symbolic artifacts, rituals, and ceremonies (Masiki, 2014).

With the advent of the Internet, various new means of communication have arisen (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020) so that the information exchanged between corporate institutions and their consumers has been connected to a point where the online discourse becomes a privileged platform for sharing brand information (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). Recent advances in communication technologies make the Internet an important medium for institutions to effectively seek to interact and engage with online communities and audiences. Universities consider the Internet as a strategic communication device and recognize the particularly influential power of the web platform, i.e., websites, in which they frequently share their brand intents on a regular

basis. Studies indicate that university websites are frequently the first part viewed by prospective students who select a potential university. In addition, current students of universities also rely on them to engage in their university life (Tomášková, 2015). Hence, it functions as a valuable gateway to display the university's 'virtual face' to both outsiders and insiders (Zhang & Tu, 2019). If the brand identity of a university is represented in its website in a way that fits the viewers' expectations and preferences, it will lead to a positive perception and evaluation of the brand, and intensifies viewers' engagement in the communication process of the university (Steinmann et al., 2015). The pictorial representation of the brand might be considered as one of the crucial success factors which will affect the website audiences' experience and evaluation of the brand (Brakus et al., 2009). Furthermore, it is appropriate to pictorially portray the brand in an online consumption community utilizing profile pictures that are clearly associated with the brand from the viewers' point of view. Hence, nowadays university websites are regarded as highly visual in essence, and visual pictures replace verbal expressions in some cases to create their identities like many corporate companies choose to use the graphic design to portray their company identity (van Riel & Balmer, 1997).

Empirical studies on branding of HEIs have increasingly explored the corporate visual identity in the modern university context (Bolhuis et al., 2015; Idris & Whitfield, 2014). However, little work has been done on HEIs with a focus on academic visual identity or the general term of visual identity, particularly in the context of China. The positive effects of brand communication, especially offline communication, are well investigated, whereas few studies have analyzed how online brand communities can be realized (Steinmann et al., 2015). There is a lack of research on how the brand identity is visually represented via profile pictures in online communication with respect to the effects on social semiotic features and further branding relevant outcomes. Consequently, this study attempts to shed light on a further understanding of the communicative meaning of pictures in some elite Chinese universities' websites, especially with a purpose to discuss how elite Chinese universities construct their visual identity to face new market conditions and achieve brand effects.

In addition, previous studies on universities seem to ignore the complexity of web genre which is comprised of several sub-pages (hypertext) (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005). Recognized as a web genre in studies geared towards information retrieval (Santini, 2008), the 'About Us' page indeed plays a relevant role among the numerous individual webpages that may be encompassed in the general framework of a website. More specifically, the 'About Us' webpage is an autobiographical, educational, and personal description of the website to visitors or customers. However, this page has been so far an under-investigated area of research as far as its semiotic codes are concerned for a brand communication analysis. Such investigation is highly related to the ongoing multidisciplinary discussion of goals concerning branding practices among universities in the neoliberal climate of marketization and internationalization of HEIs (Feng, 2019; Zhang & Tu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). To address this research gap, this study aims at figuring out how the Chinese universities provide informative messages and portray their brand identity via pictures presented on the 'About Us' webpage, which draws on a semiotic and multimodal approach of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

METHOD

DATA COLLECTION

The selection of data was determined according to the reputation and profile of a large number of universities across China. The data corpus for this study was compiled from nine Chinese universities which are known as the elite C9 League group of universities, comprising of: *Fudan University (FDU)*, *Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT)*, *Nanjing University (NJU)*, *Peking University (PKU)*, *Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU)*, *Tsinghua University (THU)*, *University of Science and Technology of China (USTC)*, *Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU)*, *Zhejiang University (ZJU)* (Yang & Welch, 2012; Yang & Xie, 2015). The rationale behind the data selection is that the C9 League universities admit more elite groups of students and academic experts than the other HEIs in China (Allen, 2017) so that they are greatly dedicated to becoming academically renowned universities. These nine universities are deemed as sitting at the top positions in the Chinese higher education system's ranking in terms of both teaching and research. They represent the elite image of the higher education of China in the world (Allen, 2017). They are also often considered as role models by other national universities in China (Yang & Xie, 2015). It is, therefore, important to investigate the effectiveness of such universities in their attempt to construct their brand identity on their websites. The data corpus consisted of all pictures that are presented on the 'About Us' webpage of the C9 League universities. We investigated two types of pictures: 'personal' images, which feature human participants or contain people participating in an activity; and 'non-personal' images, which present objects and sceneries (Zhang & Tu, 2019). However, some pictures are minimalistic and apparently out of view or have blurred focus. Therefore, they can hardly be examined in terms of communicative metafunctions. Hence, in the present study, those personal portraits and reduced-size pictures without clear pixels are not examined for meaning potentials and brand effect. All pictures were gathered between July 2019 and August 2019 before the following freshman intake.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

With a purpose to uncover the visual presentation of pictures on universities' web discourse, namely 'About Us', this study adopted Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of visual grammar which investigates visual images from representational, interactive, and compositional perspectives. This framework has been widely adapted and used in multimodal and visual investigations in web discourses (Cheng, 2016; Cheong, 2013; Suen, 2013). Previous studies (Cheng, 2016; Hamid, 2016a, 2016b; Masiki, 2011) have found that the institutional identity is often visually codified at the representational dimension that is relevant to core traits and conceptual meanings manifested in the visual elements. Thus, the present study focuses on investigating the representational dimensions of the visuals to identify the prominent semiotic features of the visual pictures employed by the Universities in their 'About Us' webpages.

Representational meanings are concerned with conceptual and narrative processes (see Figure 1). "Narrative process is a kind of visual process in which the represented participants are depicted to be involved in unfolding actions and events, process of change, transitory, spatial arrangement" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 59). Whilst visual images of conceptual representation do not contain vectors, thus do not narrate actions or events, oppositely they are presented based on their physical and spatial characteristics. Conceptual representation is

identified in terms of class, structure or meaning in visual structures of representation. There are three kinds of process in conceptual representation: symbolic process, classificational process, and analytical process. Symbolic structures define the meaning or identity of a participant as being something, belonging to some category, or having certain characteristics. The classificational structure brings different participants together in the picture to show that they belong to the same class. Analytical structures relate participants to each other in terms of a part-whole structure. It shows how the carrier or whole is made up of parts or attributes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

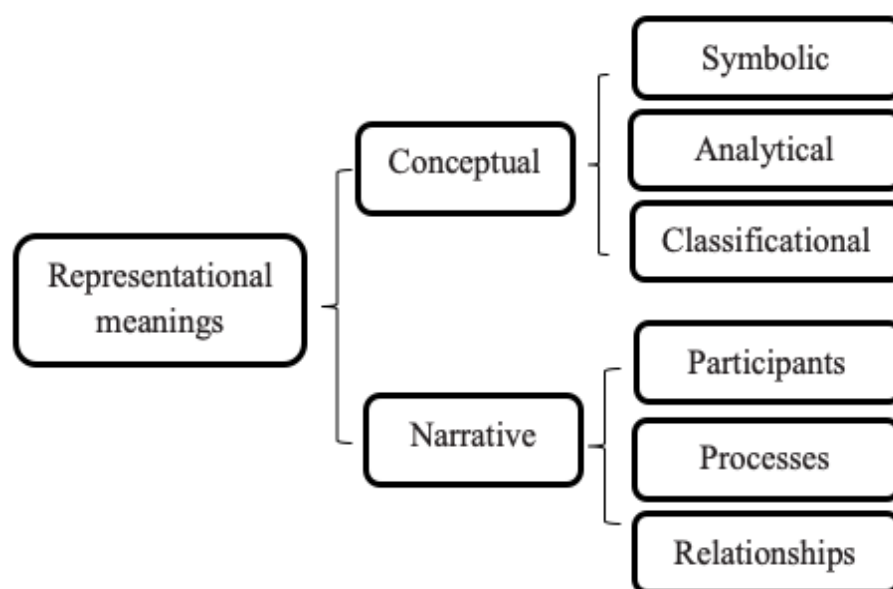


FIGURE 1. Representational meanings of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

This social semiotic approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to multimodality offers “a detailed and explicit method” and “a set of analytical tools” to enable researchers to describe more systematically the choices of visual features, and the way they are used to convey particular meanings (Zuraidah & Lau, 2018: 4). In particular, by drawing on the representational perspective, we can illustrate how visual resources are used to communicate conceptual meanings and narrative processes of HEIs. Through scrutinizing the visual conceptualizations and narrations (visuals featuring ideas and human activities), we can identify the roles universities are constructing for their audiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that the pictures are commonly used by all the nine universities to constitute their ‘About Us’ webpages (100%). Based on the existing literature of rhetorical studies, the use of pictures mainly achieves two communicative purposes. First, the graphic images function to attract the attention of the viewers. These pictures usually convey a symbolic value and thus make the webpages visually meaningful and attractive, to persuade the web visitors to navigate their websites (Cheong, 2013; Suen, 2013). These pictures usually display a multifaceted view of the university in an attractive manner, representing a broad range of settings or venues, activities or events, and different participants. Another function realized by pictures is classified as ‘supporting visuals’ when they are mainly utilized as rhetorically supportive of the accompanying texts or

contents. This type of picture is represented by the personal portraits of the presidents of the institutions, which forms the core of the presentation. This type of static visual image lacks a narrative or conceptual process, thus they are not examined in this study.

The nine universities ($n=9/100\%$) tend to utilize static pictures (i.e., visual images that do not move) on the 'About Us' webpages instead of videos ($n=1/11\%$) and flash pictures (i.e., moving images) ($n=0$). With regards to the compositional placement, pictures are found to be classified into two categories in this study, namely masthead-picture ($n=7/78\%$: FDU, HIT, NJU, PKU, SJTU, THU and XJTU) and text-picture ($n=9/100\%$). The former refers to the graphic image at the top row of online webpages that may identify the webpage and, sometimes, the particular section of the site (as indicated in Figure 2 by rectangular overlay in red). This type of visual image occupies a larger semiotic space and is more conspicuous with bright colors. This type of visuals is adopted to purposely attract readers' first glance. The visual images that are partially merged with textual descriptions are identified as text-pictures (overlay in green in Figure 2). In this study, a total of sixty-one pictures were identified as showing representational meanings with reference to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). In terms of the sub-categories of representational pictures, conceptual representations (66%/ $n=40$) far outnumber narrative representations (34%/ $n=21$) which involve actions or interactions characterized by vectors. There are no 'classificatory' typed images in the 40 conceptually represented pictures analyzed. Classificational representation refers to the visual images that the participants are presented in a superordinate-subordinate hierarchy structure. Moreover, the visual pictures presented on the 'About Us' webpages do not involve any sense of taxonomy. In other words, the conceptual meanings carried out by the images are bound up with the 'symbolic' ($n=39/97.5\%$) and 'analytical' ($n=1/2.5\%$) perspectives. Furthermore, symbolic-meaning pictures, which are the most expressive mode, are commonly employed by all the universities ($n=9/100\%$) when introducing themselves via web communication. This representational meaning is mostly observed on the main 'About Us' webpage (the first page showing the general structure of the 'About Us') or sub-pages of *Introduction* or *History*.

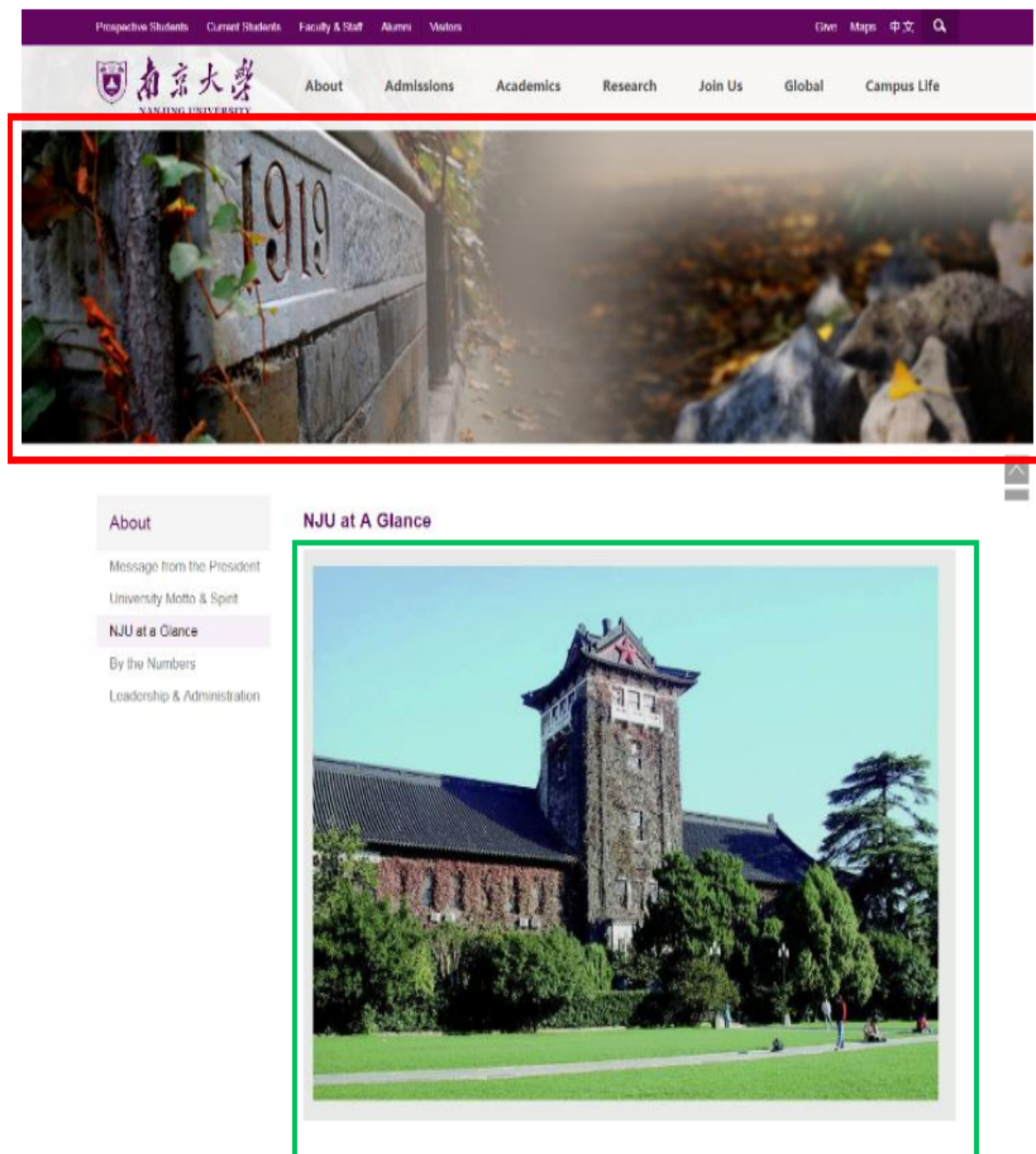


FIGURE 2. Masthead picture and text-picture on 'About Us' webpage of NJU

BRANDED VALUES: THE CONSTRUAL OF IDENTITIES IN SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS

The pictures that carry symbolic meanings usually show what the represented participants are engaged in and the details of the images are de-emphasized to show the 'mood' and 'atmosphere' of the images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Any existing knowledge with relevance to the content represented in the visual images may be signified symbolically through audiences' perception (van

Leeuwen, 2008). In other words, when visual signs are decoded by the audience through their respective previous interactions and relations, particular patterns of symbolic meanings may be formed by the connotation of the visuals. The represented semiotic signs of the visual images (i.e., pictures) will connect with viewers' existing knowledge of the social context (i.e., universities). Furthermore, the messages and values that are evoked in the symbolic representations will shape the audiences' perceptions (van Leeuwen, 2008).

TABLE 1. Symbolic representations of pictures

Symbolic Meaning	Number	Percentage	Universities
Historical, traditional, cultural values	20	51%	FDU, NJU, PKU, SJTU, THU, USTC
Harmonious environment	13	33%	FDU, NJU, SJTU, THU, USTC, XJTU, ZJU
Modernization	6	15%	NJU, SJTU, THU, ZJU
Grandeur and solemnity	4	10%	HIT, THU, USTC

The symbolic meanings of the pictures displayed are classified into four categories (see Table 1). The first category of pictures found in the data are those that portray the historical sense and cultural values embodied in the university settings. All the C9 League members are century-old universities and they have undergone the vicissitudes of time, and each university has its unique historical track. Therefore, the long-established history as well as long-standing culture and tradition are closely linked to the pride of the universities. For example, in Figure 3, a corner of the campus is shown in the masthead, in which the main visual elements presented are a mottled brick wall, liana, clutter, fallen leaves, and hazy light. In the picture, the mottled blue-brick wall portrays the traditional building style of China, especially the carving of '1919' obviously indicates the founding year of the university. The liana vines around the brick wall imply the months-and-years' passing by. The fallen leaves in the hazy light also convey a sense of seasonal change. All these semiotic resources are symbolic in nature, suggesting specific qualities more than just displaying them, and evoking the atmosphere of an ancient but harmonious environment. This type of picture alludes to the university as cherishing a historical or classical sense and cultural aura. Furthermore, specific objects are assumed as signifiers of the university culture. The most preferred visual elements indicating a university's historical culture are its landmark buildings, gates with a traditional Chinese architectural design and signature statues (e.g., stone lions, mottos carved on stones in Chinese calligraphy, horizontal inscribed board). Architectures and artefacts constitute the university culture and consolidate the identity conceptualized by the students. Identity, reality comprehension and meaning construction among students and other potential stakeholders are influenced by the physical and virtual culture portrayed, and this culture is formed by the influence of the universities' buildings, premises, aesthetics and functions of the components of these buildings (Steiner et al., 2013). As shown in Figure 4, the *Bei Da Lou* (Northern Building) of NJU is foregrounded because it is considered as the most representative building of NJU. Born in 1917, an era of fierce collision and fusion between Chinese and western civilizations, the architecture's aesthetically appealing exterior can still be observed by viewers, suggesting that the university is an inheritor of the historical culture which is maximized by this symbolic image. Although the viewers may possibly lack the background knowledge of the *Bei Da Lou* in Figure 4, this building is visually attractive and illustrates the beauty of traditional Chinese architectural features.



FIGURE 3. Masthead-picture with symbolic meaning of NJU



FIGURE 4. Text-picture with symbolic meaning of NJU

Having a long history is regarded as an essential aspect of a prestigious status in the Chinese culture and this is emphasized by a number of universities. The most prominent feature is the explicit evaluative markers of showcasing the ‘earliest’ and constant use of graphic signifiers which are represented by historical elements, such as the founding year of ‘1919’ in Figure 3 and *Bei Da Lou* in Figure 4. The universities frequently create a prestigious image from their glorious past and highlight that their tradition and culture are cultivated by their inheritance and are being practiced today. This importance of a long establishment is commonly discovered in promotional discourses of universities because it is vital to establish credentials in branding as Chinese people value tradition (Feng, 2019). This discursive practice resonates with universities in other social contexts (e.g., Australia) whose basic premise in their argument for being a university of choice for international students: long tradition, heritage and educational values (Zhang & Tu, 2019).

The second symbolic meaning conveyed by the visual pictures is to depict the pleasant environment of the universities. It is widely acknowledged that the pleasantly landscaped campus is of importance to students on campus as previous studies have evidenced that active interactions with an enjoyable natural scenery may increase confidence and reduce stress levels of students (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The pictures of scenic spots are very often ‘beautified’, featuring the vegetation, lawn, blue sky, beautiful sunset, lake, etc. Figure 5 shows a campus scenery in an autumn setting. The positive effect can be reached by the sense of greenery (i.e., trees), water (i.e., lake) and architecture in the picture. The scenic view of the architecture in the background and conspicuous presence of plants would enhance the students’ life satisfaction with campus environmentally, socially, culturally and physically (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). When the universities are depicted as peaceful and harmonious, this convinces the viewers (mainly potential students) to eagerly experience the environment by enrolling as a student in the university.



FIGURE 5. Symbolic picture of USTC

Modernization is one of the most predominant directions for the development of Chinese universities. Modernization here means that Chinese universities should boost the contemporary development of sciences and technology (Ouyang, 2004) as well as the modernized infrastructure of the institutions. The quest for modernization for universities is usually realized by the construction of buildings and premises with user functionality and aesthetics of artefacts (Steiner et al., 2013). Hence, several symbolic pictures highlight the visual appeal of modernized architectures and research bases of the universities which are inseparable parts of university life. What can be viewed in Figure 6 is a campus view at dusk in which the picture provides a varied and colorful mosaic of settings. Although the trees, cars and pedestrians are not clearly viewed at a glance due to a lower modality, the building is granted salience through the stark contrast to the pedestrians, cars and trees that are unnoticeable. This mirrored-glass-wall building is attached with a higher value and consequently creates a sense of ‘modern’ and ‘high-technology’ as part of the university image.



FIGURE 6. Symbolic picture of NJU

The last meaning symbolized by the pictures is implying the solemnity or a grandeur sense of the universities. This meaning is typically achieved by capitalizing on campus buildings to induce a sense of extraordinary gravitas and peculiarity. Both the left and right pictures in Figure 7 show the buildings of HIT which is a university that is full of *The Soviet Union* characteristics. Its buildings resemble the visually stunning Russian architectural style. The two pictures also reveal the historical features of the university. Therefore, we can claim that there may be more than one meaning interpretation of a single visual picture. Moreover, in Figure 7, the far-distance shot of a grandeur appearance is more observable than the detailed historical elements. The conveyed meaning of magnificence and grandeur is promoted to the public.

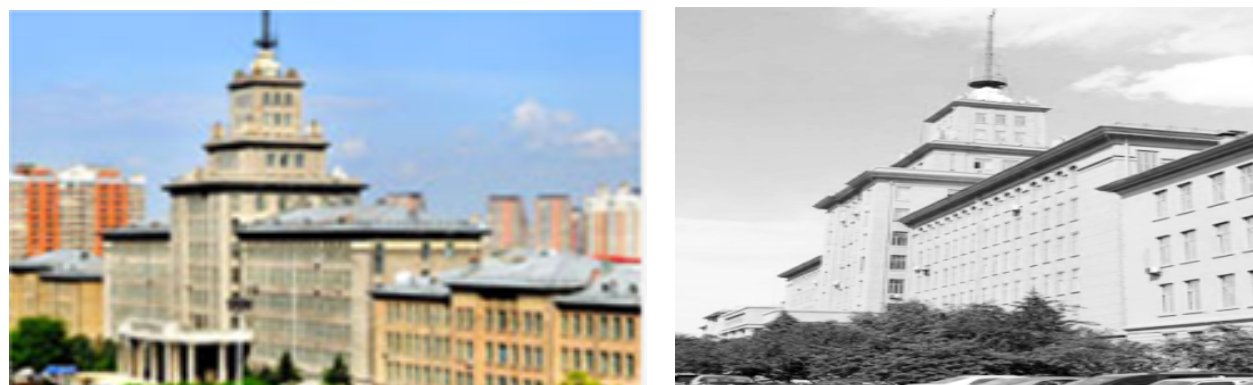


FIGURE 7. Symbolic pictures of HIT

Analytical meaning is minimally conveyed by the visual images on the ‘About Us’ webpages since there is only one picture revealing visual elements in a part-whole structure. As exemplified in Figure 8, the panoramic view of the university campus is the ‘whole’ as a carrier that possesses the ‘parts’ (attributes): gate, wall, trees, statue, buildings, etc. The photograph describes a multifaceted university with the above-mentioned attributes which are grouped together to form a sense of being organized, harmonious and integrative. This photograph uses a

wide frontal angle to capture a panoramic overview. The preliminary purpose of this picture is to satisfy the audiences' preference for a spacious campus as the sense of majesty is conveyed through the generous use of space. This salient visual image is placed on the top row of the main 'About Us' webpage, and the panoramic view from the main gate signifies an implied message of 'welcome' to the audiences.

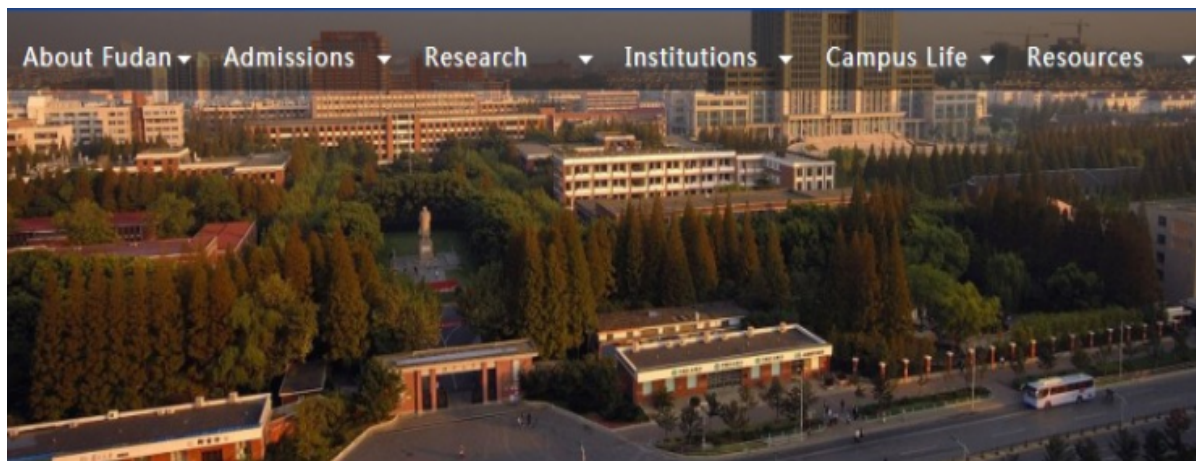


FIGURE 8. Analytical picture of FDU

Through the signification of pictures, multiple signs visually contribute to shaping four dominant conceptual ideas in relation to cultural and social values that are related to the past, present and future of the universities. The university identity is a desired image that the university insiders (e.g., administrators) expect to project which ideally reflects and influences its external reputation. The aforesaid symbols as visual representations of the university reality turn into part of the university identity, and the students and stakeholders grasp perceptions and values relevant to these attributes. The symbolic attributes depicted in these stable pictures, both material (e.g., architecture, trees) and virtual (e.g., atmosphere, mood), affect the establishment of an aggregate institutional identity of the university.

RECONTEXTUALIZING CHARACTERS: DISPLAYING IDENTITIES IN NARRATIVE ACTIVITIES

Another significant concept for investigating the discursive process of social practice is 'recontextualization', which refers to the consideration of discourses as comprising participants, behaviors, goals, values, and activities (Machin, 2013). Human participants are thus recontextualized as characters in visual narratives, where the 'characters' do 'things' in specific contexts. In other words, narrative representation contains a 'vector' which connects different participants in a kind of 'doing' or 'happening' relation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The primary communicative purpose of these visual images is to offer the viewers a special type of 'experience' through a mixture of narrative and persuasive content. In branding discourses, mainly of web genres, these visually virtual experiences are frequently utilized as a metaphor for sensory interactions with people, places and social practices that are intended for branding. This kind of 'experience' narration projects a particular lifestyle associated with a certain social identity that has worthwhile values: you, as viewers, should engage yourselves in (Caldas-Coulthard, 2008).

TABLE 2. Narrative representations of pictures

Narrative Content	Number	Percentage	Universities
University activities	7	33%	NJU, THU
Extracurricular activities	5	24%	FDU, NJU, USTC, ZJU
Study activities	5	24%	HIT, NJU
Research activities	4	19%	HIT, NJU

Narrative visual pictures are optionally used by the universities as there are seven (78%) 'About Us' webpages presenting this kind of picture. The narrative pictures mainly visualize four types of participant engagement: university activities, extracurricular activities, study and research (see Table 2). On the whole, there is no remarkable difference across the narrative contents. The more frequently displayed narrative pictures are related to university activities ($n=7/33\%$) in which the emphasis is directly laid on the collective representation of university images rather than individual students. Figures 9 and 10 show an academic forum and a university convocation, in which the actors, i.e., the university's president, an invited scholar, and university's leaders are presented. These two pictures representatively reflect that the universities prefer to choose the images containing 'news' items, which mostly portray teachers and students and others in formal group situations, and avoid featuring university-internal matters. Chinese universities are rooted in a collectivistic society where collective achievements and interpersonal relationships are highlighted (Hofstede et al., 2010). Consequently, visual images related to group integrity are preferably used to create association and trust between social parties. The pictures that show university activities such as forums and graduation ceremonies, emphasize the academia and internationalization of Chinese universities. Therefore, the prospective audiences are associated to experience the universities' diverse communities.



FIGURE 9. University activity of NJU



FIGURE 10. University activity of THU

There is a similar tendency between pictures depicting students' extracurricular activities and studying ($n=5/ 24\%$ respectively). The narrative image in Figure 11 is a rear view of a student lowering his (her) head to possibly perform a reading action. The image is non-transactional since there is only one participant, the student is considered as the actor, and the 'goal' of the participant is not exactly shown. In this picture, the individualization is expressed through the 'aloneness' of the student. The close-up shot is not applied here since the emphasis of the visual image is to portray the tranquility and a calm atmosphere in which the student is immersed in rather than the emotion or action output. The following picture in Figure 12 is extracted from FDU's website and describes the graduation of students. The vector is formed by the direction of the students' (actor) tossing up their academic caps (goal). This motion brings the readers' eyes to the caps in the air thus it allows audiences to imagine engaging in this activity and increases their sense of participation. The students are 'homogenized' in that they are all presented as wearing the same clothes (i.e., baccalaureate gown), performing the same actions or unified poses (i.e., tossing up caps). An enthusiastic and celebratory atmosphere is evoked by this type of 'graduation' which is achieved by 'collectivization' (Machin, 2007). To sum up, the narrative pictures depicting students' extracurricular activities, either in groups or as independent individuals, benefit to establish the university's lifestyle as vibrant but harmonious, as well as having a balanced routine between academic study and non-academic life.



FIGURE 11. Narrative picture of FDU 1



FIGURE 12. Narrative picture of FDU 2

Activities concerning studies are also narrated by the pictures as the main task of the universities is to guide students to grasp knowledge which is regarded as the most valued commodities of the educational institutions (Hyland, 2012). University identity construction, for example, through the academic self-presentation and impression of curriculum and programs studies, impacts the university's reputation and increases its attractiveness. In Figure 13, two

persons' hands are shown, although the body and facial images are unseen, the hands and fingers form the action vector which imposes action on the tablet and refers to information searching. While HIT's picture in Figure 14 reveals two students retrieving books on the shelf. The left picture in Figure 15 shows two doctors who are possibly discussing in a laboratory, while the right visual showcases a few participants sitting around a table having a group discussion. It is seen that all the settings of study activities are quite formal and official, and the participants are showing a serious attitude. There is one thing in common that the actions related to studying and information searching are more likely to be performed by the fingers and hands which create a narrative effect that the audiences are seeing the earnest attitude being formed towards learning and the habit of 'seeking knowledge'. The angle of viewing these learning activities tends to be from a profile angle in which the audiences are just witnesses to the scene, and this decreases their sense of reader identification (Machin, 2007) so that the audiences believe of the visual images (students participating in the act of learning) are also engaged in those activities. In terms of the participant presentation, the 'collectivization' is more signified than 'individualization' as the image of teamwork and cooperation is created by those pictures.



FIGURE 13. Study activity of HIT 1



FIGURE 14. Study activity of HIT 2



FIGURE 15. Study activities of NJU

As top-ranking national universities, the C9 League universities bear the mission of boosting the country's scientific prowess (Ouyang, 2004), thus they emphasize their adherence to academic research and services to the society. Therefore, research activities are also an essential aspect to be narrated through pictures to intensify universities' high-level scientific research-based identity. In the following three pictures taken from NJU in Figure 16, the professionalism of the research community is unified by the active roles the individuals play in the narrative processes, with their eyelines and arms engaged in scientific actions. In terms of the represented participants, the 'categorization' is formed by showing 'cultural' features. The "cultural categorization" is realized through standard attributes of appearance and adornment (Machin, 2007: 119). The cultural feature of research may be shown by their physical circumstance (lab), appearance (lab coat), and material items (experimental supplies). Thus clothing, physical environment and supplies jointly construct a professional research environment, in particular it emphasizes the professional and research nature of the universities. The portrayal of research activities mirrors the desired expectation of the prospective students that the universities are among advanced research innovation levels and possibly meet their demand for research development. In relation to the depiction of the value of academic orientation, the pictures emphasize the research-based nature of the universities. The pursuit of excellence of the general research environment is represented by a number of visual connotations: academic professionalization, meticulousity, teamwork.

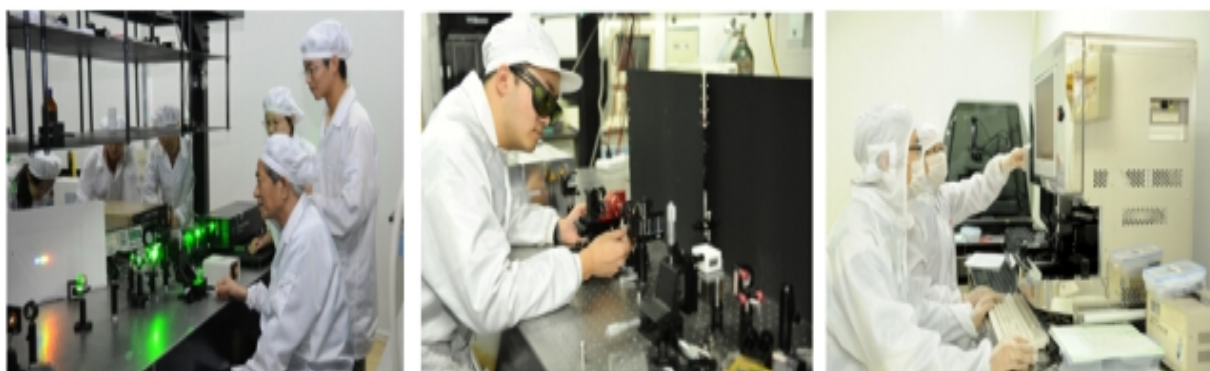


FIGURE 16. Research activities of NJU

By employing the multimodal resource of pictures, university advertisers establish a particular version of reality. The creation of virtual scenarios and attributes of the universities is part of this characterization. The pictures utilized on the 'About Us' also situate the participants in particular settings in order to construct different students' identities. The 'activity' which the participants are partaking in is a highly important aspect of the university representation. The characters are recontextualized as dynamic in various circumstances. Students are presented either in groups or as independent individuals, and representing a variety of social variables: both genders of different ages, ethnic origins, professional interests, and social class, etc. Moreover, the represented participants in the visuals are more frequently depicted as a 'type' in a group rather than specific individuals (van Leeuwen, 2008). The diversity of the mixed community (e.g., discussion, research, conference) is unified by the active roles that the participants play in the narrative processes, which mirrors the comprehensiveness of the universities. It also reflects the desired variability of the prospective students who are the target audiences of the webpages and offers multiple choices of images that they can identify with. It is worth noting that the foregrounding of students in the visual images, as well as the fewer representations of university staff, uncovers students' agentive role in the university environment. Therefore, the university is portrayed as assisting prospective students to be self-motivated in fulfilling their expectations and avoids describing students as passive recipients of study and improvement. Web readers, from diverse social backgrounds, have different expectations of a university. Consequently, a variety of visual images are tailored and employed on the university webpages to increase information provision, as well as to construct a multifaceted university identity. Along with displaying a positive and energetic atmosphere in the campus, the visual pictures contribute substantially to the promotional purposes of the webpage presentations. The viewers visualize the qualities and values intensified in the visual images, hence confirming what the accompanying texts describe: a vibrant and active atmosphere, a hands-on study experience, a closely-knit academic community of diverse individualities, and an international and multicultural university environment (Tomášková, 2015).

To summarize, this study offers several interesting theoretical insights into the investigation on identity establishment of visual brand identity of HEIs (as shown in Figure 17). The findings reveal that common traits associated with university brand identity could be observed in their websites which focus on symbolic representations. It suggests that the pictures selected by the Chinese universities tend to display features that are interpretable within a high context culture which is more featured of being static and its community members have a strong sense of history (Zhang & O' Halloran, 2012). Chinese universities have a strong preference for pictures symbolizing a historical sense and cultural values which present representative historical buildings as both solemnity and grandeur, with a purpose to remind viewers of the long-established history of the universities. Chinese society has high pragmatism so that it prefers to maintain time-honored traditions and norms (Hofstede et al., 2010: 37-38). It seems that the 'old is gold' adage is still very much applicable to Chinese universities where a time-honored history is the hallmark of an established university (Hamid, 2016a). This finding supports that institutional genres are culture-based, and that they originate, develop and decline in accordance with the resources, needs and expectations of the social contexts in which they live. The Chinese universities also depict themselves as situated in a pleasant environment through positioning pictures of the campus as a graceful, harmonious and modernized setting. This indicates that the universities aim to establish a prestigious image as elite-class in the global education circle, both working as inheritors of history and culture as well as contributing to advanced modern education. The overall visual

representation evokes an atmosphere of a vibrant but harmonious university environment to present themselves as cherishing historic traditions and at the same time keeping pace with modern development.

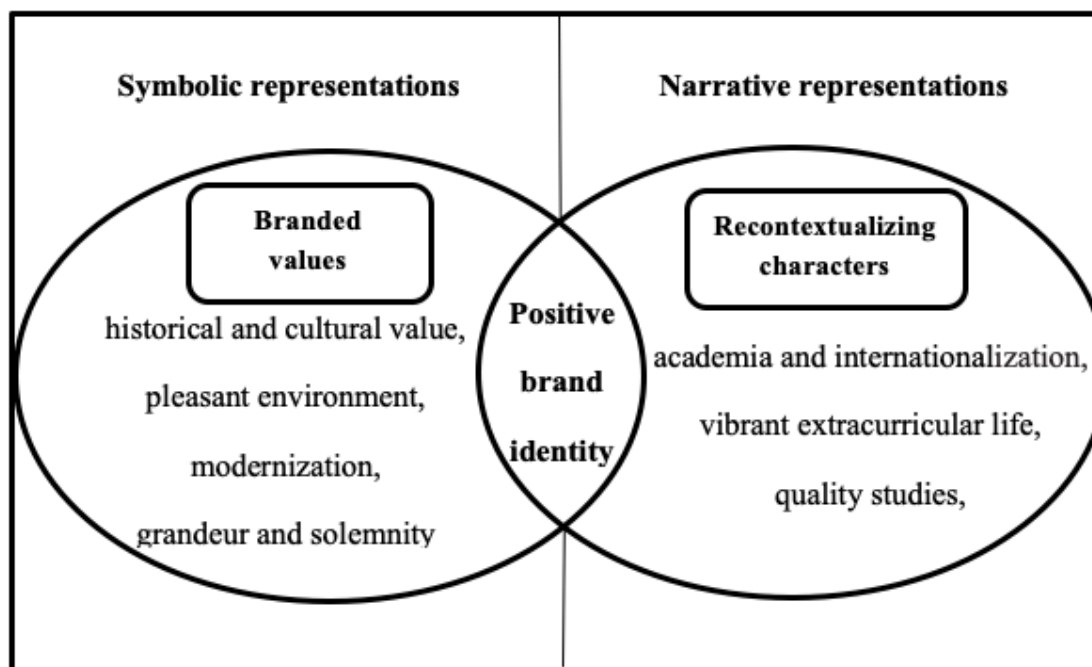


FIGURE 17. Visual construction of brand identity of HEIs in web-mediated communication

Moreover, the Chinese universities underscore their identity with a vibrant campus life via the images of both non-academic and knowledge-seeking activities; namely, university activities, extracurricular activities, study activities, research activities. These dominantly represented narrative contents suggest that the universities are not only providing objective information through visual images but also showcasing carefully curated details and organizing them strategically with a purpose to maximize their appeal to the target readers who are potential students. Therefore, to attract them, the universities present these visual images as positioning scenes of being valuable and qualified so as to achieve a persuasive effect or may be identified as a promotional purpose. In other words, these visual images are geared to the marketing and branding trend of Chinese universities. What can be asserted is that the visual pictures are not only perceived and used as important attention-grabbing strategies but also effective promotional devices, which are beneficial for branding and marketing institutions in web communication. Chinese universities in the corpus do not display the images with hard sale characteristics as other commercial business commonly does which is proved by the minimal employment of advertisement visual pictures on their webpages. Although a few traces of promotional features are interpreted in some visual images, the communicative function of being informative in nature of Chinese universities' web genres, at least the 'About Us' webpages, is even more apparent.

CONCLUSION

This article attempts to connect a visual approach to an under-investigated institutional context, namely Chinese universities of C9 League, and it extends the analytical perspective to seek how these elite Chinese universities construct their brand identity and offer information to the prospective viewers through visual pictures in their 'About Us' webpages. The analysis of the non-linguistic element, i.e., pictures, has confirmed the importance of visual resources as independent messages that carry fundamentally representational meanings instead of relying fully on the linguistic text as its illustration or specification (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The findings have provided ample evidence that pictures significantly contribute to the process of meaning-making in university web communication and brand construction. Visual images work effectively as a rhetorical unit to achieve a mitigating effect in communication.

In this article, we have selected nine elite Chinese universities from a larger corpus to seek the knowledge regarding visual brand identity construction in the online academic institutional context. Although this study may not generalize findings from a small corpus, it indeed offers some interesting insights with growing concerns regarding visual identity, brand practice and higher education institutions. We assert that visual components are efficient means to be utilized as communication strategies by universities in their websites to promote a positive identity. Methodologically, from a semiotic stance, social values are designed and embodied via employing multifarious semiotic discursive elements and strategies. Hence, they should be analyzed on the basis of a systematic approach of the discursive features instead of disregarding them in the comprehension and promotion of the institutions. This study offers a heuristic understanding of how to use appropriate visual pictures to project a positive identity of Chinese universities in their quest for effective brand communication. Finally, the visual-based approach of this study attempts to shed knowledge to webpage designers/writers or those involved in higher education branding and promotion, that the use of visual images and their features should be carefully considered when creating professional web communication and branding strategies. A future examination of interpersonal and compositional meanings communicated by visuals is recommended to discover more brand images established by the higher education institutions.

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