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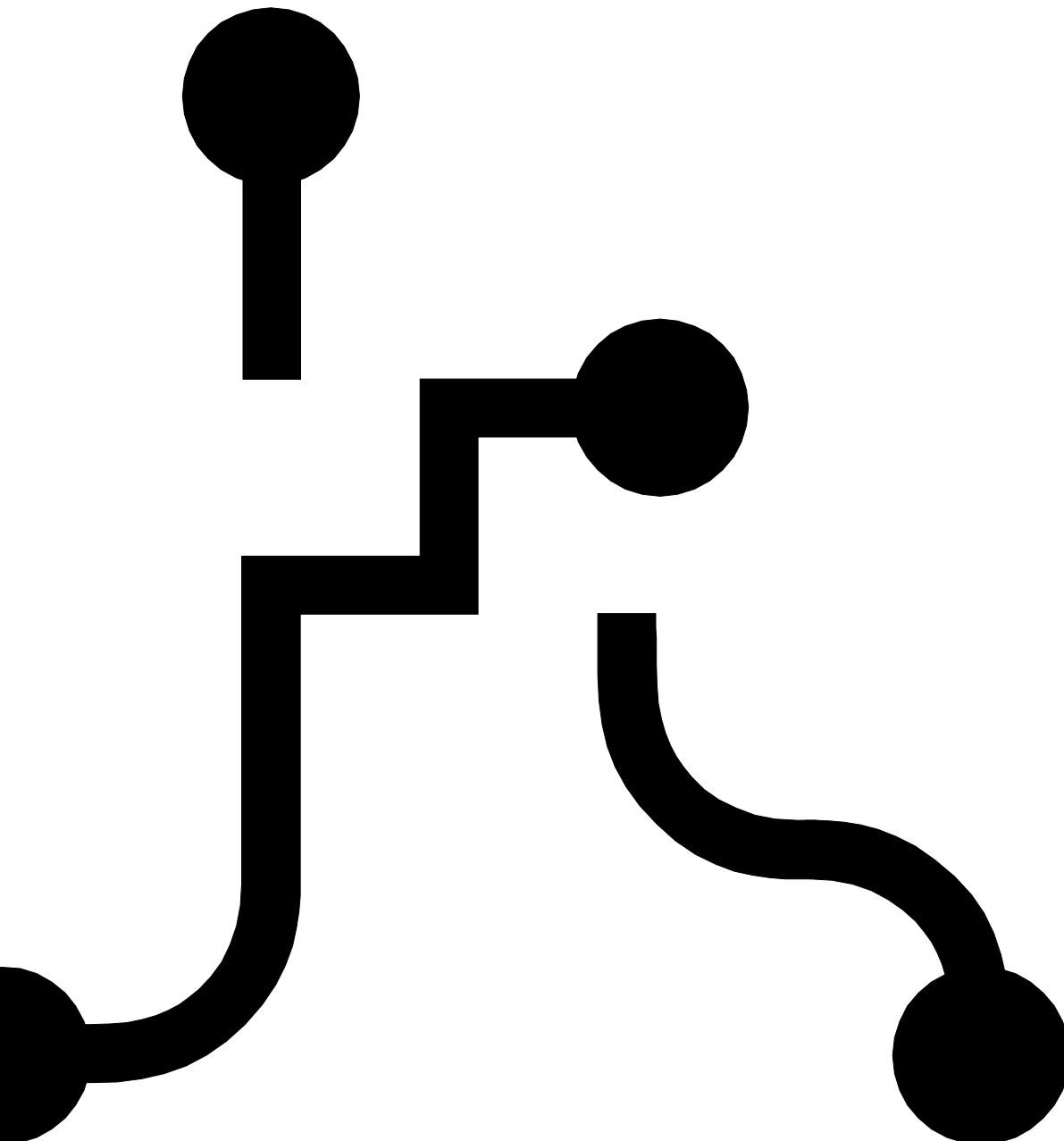
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## Marketisation of Ghanaian higher academic institutions: a hypermodal analysis of universities' homepages

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### Abstract

The marketisation of higher education continues to incite universities towards the adoption of vital promotional practices. As a result, the university homepage has gained much interest from scholars and researchers from various backgrounds, including discourse analysts. However, the bulk of the literature focuses on homepages of universities in Anglo-American and Asian-Pacific contexts, whereas research of African and, particularly, Ghanaian universities' homepages remains scant. In addressing this gap, the present study investigated how selected Ghanaian universities project their corporate identities (CIs) to promote their products and services through the hypermodal resources (images, verbal resources, and navigational elements) on their institutional homepages by drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar model, and Zhang and O'Halloran's (2012) hypermodal framework. The findings reveal that although Ghanaian universities portray their space as an intense academic environment, they tend to emphasise human resources rather than the existence of structural resources or facilities in representing their identities. In addition, the discoverability of information on the homepages was found to be low, with no overlaps between information sub-categories. The study, therefore, contributes to the scholarship on the marketisation of higher education and has practical implications for the design of universities' homepages in Ghana and other jurisdictions. Recommendations for further research are offered.

**Keywords:** Ghanaian universities, homepage, hypermodality, marketisation of universities, visual grammar, semiotic resources

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## 0. Introduction

The phenomenon of marketisation as a result of the commodification and massification of higher education that began in the 1970s appears to be deeply ingrained in universities worldwide. This was almost unheard of about three decades ago (Belch & Belch, 2003; Butterman, 2007 cited in Henderson, 2011; Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Fairclough, 1993). Constantinides and Stagno (2011, p. 10), for instance, opine, “marketing had once been a term that could be spoken only in the most hushed tones in academia and, in the past, ideas about the marketing of educational institutions often gained limited support.” However, the story appears to be different now, and this may not be surprising, especially when one observes that the trend has now affected other non-profit organisations such as clinics and health care centres, charity organisations, museums, non-profit partnerships and labour-intensive services (Idris & Whitfield, 2014). It suffices, then, to say that university advertising is a footprint of a global change in how institutions should operate.

Indeed, such changes in higher education have been considered to be driven by factors including internationalisation (de Wit, 2011; Knight, 2008 cited in de Wit, 2011; Marmolejo, 2012, cited in Henard, Diamond, & Roseveare, 2012), massification of education agendas (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2015; Hanover Research, 2014; Whetten, Williamson, Heo, Varnhagen, & Major, 2004), and commodification upon which universities are now forced to operate. Commodification of education, for example, explains the situation where higher educational institutions, being infused with marketing values, serve knowledge as a commodity offered at a weighed cost worked by “comparing the cost of acquiring a degree (tangible certification of product acquisition) with the financial earnings the degree supposedly enables” (Schwartzman, 2013, p. 2). Thus, students have become ‘consumers’ of commodities involving certifications, set of skills, and knowledge that have high employment opportunities (Miller, 2010).

Consequently, universities are now interested in showing how the offered degree programmes are linked to one job market or another. Symes (1996, p. 138) reports that, in Australia, the *Good University Guide* which is published annually “provides a comprehensive survey of the courses offered by Australian universities which are then ranked and star-rated in terms of the 'starting salaries of graduates', 'which universities get you the jobs' and similar exchange value criteria.” These, among other similar practices, culminate into what has been referred to in the literature as the “marketisation of higher education”, defined by Ek, Ideland, Jönsson and Malmberg (2013, p. 1306) as “change from a previously relatively autonomous academic organisation to one based on business ideals.”

Consequently, advertising is gaining more rigorous support and attention among universities. This is particularly evinced in universities’ adoption of more expansive and far-

reaching advertising platforms. The *Hanover Research* (2014) ascertained the existence of traditional advertising/marketing strategies and trending advertising strategies which are often inspired by technology. Whereas traditional strategies include radio and television advertisements, referrals by current students and alumni, sponsored visits for students, open house events, flyers, prospectuses, posters, postcards, and job advertisements and brochures (Askehave, 2007; Zhang, 2017), trending strategies include social media platforms, blogs, and homepages of universities' websites.

However, traditional strategies are hardly ever effective in accomplishing the objectives of universities (Perkins Will, cited in *Hanover Research*, 2014), thus enhancing the prominence of trending advertising strategies (homepages and social media platforms [Galan, Lawley & Clements, 2015]). Comparing social media to homepages, Constantinides and Stagno (2011), for example, confirm, after a survey conducted among future university students in the Netherlands that even though social media are extremely popular among students, their impact on students' decision making regarding study and institutions is low. The opposite holds for homepages, as revealed in the following lines: "According to one recent analysis, which refers to the university website as 'the ultimate brand statement', a homepage is a key component in the student experience, and can make or break decisions about whether to attend" (*Hanover Research*, 2014, p. 9).

Being a vital rhetorical platform for corporate bodies, including academic institutions, then, homepages have become avenues for selling 'products' and promoting identities. This has motivated studies underpinned by either the genre theory (Swales, 1990) to investigate the rhetorical structure of homepages (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005; Luzon, 2002; Suen, 2009; Tetteh, 2016; and Zhang, 2017) or the social semiotic theory (Halliday, 1978; Halliday, 1994) and multimodal approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to explore how the semiotic resources that are utilised on homepages promote the image of the involved organisations (Atai & Asadnia, 2016; Kindt, 2014; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2012). Yet, similar studies that investigate the homepages of African and, particularly, Ghanaian universities seem to be non-existent in the literature. Hence, the current study seeks to fill this research gap by investigating how Ghanaian universities project their CIs to promote their products and services, through an analysis of the hypermodal resources on their institutional homepages. The research question that we seek to answer in this study, therefore, is:

- How do the selected Ghanaian universities, through the hypermodal resources on their institutional homepages, project their CIs to promote their products and services?

In addressing this question, we argue that the analysis of the affordances of the semiotic resources on a homepage can propel improvement in the discursive practices of corporate entities, whereas the absence of such an undertaking can result in mediocrity and poor

attitude towards novelty, stagnation, poor image construction, and diminishing returns in fiercely competitive environments.

The rest of the paper is organised in four parts. The first part discusses the pertinent literature in order to position this study on a solid conceptual footing; the second part describes the methodology adopted in the study. Analysis and discussion of the data are presented in part three, while the final part concludes by highlighting the implications of the study.

## **1. Literature review**

### **1.1 Corporate identity and semiotic choices**

Bertelsen (1998) explains that the whole idea of ‘university branding’ that boomed in the face of universities’ adoption of marketisation principles “functions to differentiate companies in a competitive market . . . , builds corporate identity, representing the product, the company and its ability to deliver, and ensures that a company’s public image agrees with its brand persona” (p. 142). The above proposition appears to highlight CI’s components which comprise a company, its products and its ability to deliver. Devereux, Melewar and Foroudi (2017, p. 111) state, “there is no universally accepted definition of corporate identity which fits a construct that is inherently complex, dynamic, and consists of interchangeable variables.” Consequently, in defining CI, Devereux et al. (2017, p. 111) cite a number of researchers who share different views on the construct:

‘what an organisation is’ (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Kitchen et al., 2013), ‘all corporate expressions’ (Cornelissen & Harris, 2001, 63), or what a ‘company’s ‘essence’ is’ (Olins, 1976, 65). It is also seen as what makes an organisation unique and can incorporate the organisation’s communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry identity, and strategy (Melewar, 2003; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

In fact, it appears that CI is used interchangeably with other related constructs—corporate branding, organisational identity, corporate image, corporate reputation, visual identity, and corporate personality (Balmer, 1998; Devereux et al., 2017; Melewar, 2003). With regard to visual identity (VI), for example, Anson (1998), Stuart and Kerr (1999) and Topalian (1984) stipulate that managers and designers use CI interchangeably with VI (that is the visual schemes including symbols and logotypes of organisations, distinctively used by designers to represent a company or an institution). It appears, then, that VI is an integral component of CI. Consequently, according to Devereux et al. (2017, p. 112) and van Riel and Balmer (1997; cited in Tahtinen, 2014), ‘visual design and symbolic features of an organization’ and

'graphic design' respectively are key components of the approaches involved in studying CI. This opens up an opportunity for this study which seeks to analyse the verbal and non-verbal elements on universities' homepages.

More importantly, however, CIs require management by corporate organisations. But how do organisations manage their corporate identities? Melewar (2003) and Melewar, Karaosmanoglu, and Paterson (2005) contribute immensely to this topic by reviewing the literature on the corporate identity construct to detect its core components. These core components include corporate communication, corporate design, corporate culture, corporate behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity and corporate strategy. Of these core components, not only Melewar (2003), but also Anson (1998), and Stuart and Kerr (1999) have all intimated the criticality of the corporate communication component for the promotion of organisations' CIs. Melewar *et al.* (2005) identify two forms of corporate communication, namely controlled and uncontrolled. Whereas the former (further categorised into management, marketing, and organisational communication) is intentionally undertaken by management to enhance relationships among stakeholders, the latter exerts an unintentional influence on stakeholders' perceptions.

Melewar *et al.* (2005) further indicate that the management and marketing types of controlled communication, as above identified, help create a strong and positive CI for organisations, since they involve the communication of their vision and mission, and the promotion of products and services, whereas the third, organisational communication, concerns the communication between the organisation and interdependent stakeholders. The first two types of controlled corporate communication serve as the conceptual groundwork of this paper which explores how Ghanaian higher academic institutions employ various verbal and non-verbal resources to communicate their vision and mission, as well as sell their 'products' and services on their homepages, with a view to construing a positive CI. This ties into Hyland's conclusion that "[t]here is now broad agreement that identity is created from the texts we engage in and the semiotic choices we make" (Hyland, 2012, p. 309).

### **1.2 The discourse of universities' marketisation**

Several studies (Askehave, 2007; Bhatia, 2005; Edu-Buandoh, 2010; Fairclough, 1995; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013; Zhang, 2017) confirm that what used to be purely academic discourses are becoming more promotional and moving towards the discourses of corporate bodies and businesses. Undertaken from a diachronic perspective, Fairclough's conclusion on the matter could not be more enlightening:

The 1966–67 entry gives information about what is provided on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. In the 1993 prospectus, by contrast, the promotional function is primary; it is designed to ‘sell’ the university and its courses to potential applicants in the context of a competitive market (Fairclough, 1995, cited in Askehave, 2007, p. 724).

Interestingly, Fairclough’s observation about the promotional function of the prospectus in an academic context is corroborated by Bhatia (2005) who also acknowledges the invasion of promotional values in most discursive forms, and particularly in the academia.

Nevertheless, Mayr (2008), upon a linguistic analysis of the promotional discourse of four British universities, shows that the texts in question contain positive linguistic items, modelled after advertising discourse, and presenting higher education as a marketable commodity, while portraying a ‘caring image’ for students who are construed as potential customers.

This situation does not seem to differ in Asia, as shown by Zhang’s (2017) analysis of the “About Us” section in five Chinese university homepages from a critical discourse analytic (CDA) perspective. This means that most discourses in academic communities are becoming promotional in intent. Other research works undertaken in a Chinese or Asian context (Han, 2014; Xiong, 2012; Zhu, Ren, & Han, 2016) confirm the changing, if not changed, discourses of universities as a result of their turn towards marketisation.

Whereas the bulk of this research has been undertaken outside of Africa, it may be plausibly hypothesized that universities in Africa, and for that matter Ghana, have also moved towards the marketisation of higher education. In corroboration of the above, Edu-Buandoh (2010), upon studying the Corporate Strategic Plans (CSPs) of four universities in Ghana (namely, University of Ghana [UG], Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology [KNUST], University of Cape Coast [UCC], and University of Education, Winneba [UEW]), pointed to a shift from the traditional academic discursive practices that characterise universities to discursive practices of marketisation. She contends that the studied document (Corporate Strategic Plan) was an invention in higher education circles in Ghana, borne out of the governmental mandate concerning universities’ adoption of the new marketing agenda.

A unique feature of the studies mentioned above is that the researchers bemoaning the gradual undoing of universities’ mission are mostly critical discourse analysts who apply the tools of CDA. However, as Askehave (2007, p. 724) observes, “[w]hether one praises or fears the marketization of universities, its role as a strategic tool in higher education affairs is on the increase and present at various levels of university practice.” Bertelsen (2008, cited in Zhang & O’Halloran, 2013) shares similar views and, thus, calls for an ‘eclectic compromise’ which encompasses the principles of both models. It is in response to Bertelsen’s call for an

eclectic compromise that this study was conducted. In other words, although this study shares the concerns of critics over universities tilting towards promotional practices of corporate businesses, it does not deny that Ghanaian institutions will have to adapt to the changing market conditions in order to maintain their competitiveness in a global market.

### ***1.3 Corporate identity projections on universities' homepages***

Although Wilson and Meyer (2009), and Zhang (2017) allege that universities' homepages are heavily under-researched, quite a few works have investigated them. These include Atai and Asadnia (2016), Hoang and Rojas-Lizana (2015), and Tomaskova (2011). However, very few works (Hyland, 2011, 2012; Kindt, 2014; Michelson & Valencia, 2016; Tomaskova, 2015) have applied a multimodal discourse analytic (MDA) framework to study the homepage of universities in the context of the trending marketisation of universities and corporate identity construction (Mafofo & Banda, 2014; O'Halloran, Wignell & Tan, 2015; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2012, 2013). Michelson and Valencia (2016), for example, apply Kress' social semiotic approach to multimodality in analysing the written language, layout, and visual language on the institutional website of a Study Abroad programme.

In all of these studies, although notions of identity construction can be singled out, they are not discussed in the context of the marketisation of higher education which brings to the fore issues of globalisation or internationalisation and competitiveness among universities. It is Mafofo and Banda (2014), O'Halloran et al. (2015) and Zhang and O'Halloran (2012, 2013), however, who paid considerable attention to the corporate identities of the universities whose homepages were studied. Zhang and O'Halloran (2012) adopted a hypermodal approach in analysing the homepages of the National University of Singapore and the Tsinghua University in China. They observe that whereas the National University of Singapore "foregrounds and promotes its identity as a vibrant community", Tsinghua University may be seen to be assuming a "university-centric position" whose identity as a traditional and authoritative institution distances the university from society. In a similar study, O'Halloran et al. (2015) extend the multimodal social semiotic approach utilised in Zhang and O'Halloran (2012, 2013) to study Curtin University's branding strategies and tactics that were pursued to effectively position the institution among competitors.

Even so, one observes that, with the exception of Mafofo and Banda's (2014) paper, all the works reviewed so far have been undertaken outside of Africa. Using MDA, Mafofo and Banda (2014) sought to unravel how multi-semiotic choices between verbal and visual modes help to create identities for selected South African universities (University of the Western Cape, the University of Cape Town, and Stellenbosch University) which seek to attract clients both internally and internationally, thus becoming competitive, powerful and



attractive brands. They conclude: “the homepages blended cultural semiotic artefacts, historical, global and transformational discourses, and architectural landscapes to construct different brand identities that, in turn, rebrand the universities from edifices of apartheid education to equal opportunity institutions” (p. 417).

Although Mafofo and Banda’s work shares some similarity with the current study, there are many points of divergence that merit highlighting. Apart from the fact that the Ghanaian setting differs from the South African context and deserves bespoke treatment, their study also addressed broader cultural issues involving the imposition of Apartheid in South Africa which is not a concern for this study. Bearing in mind how deeply contextual aspects can affect the analysis of these semiotic elements in a multimodal ensemble, we reworked the subject with an untainted focus on the main research question of this paper.

## **2. Methodology**

This section discusses the methodological framework that is adopted in this study. It outlines the research design, the sample size and sampling technique as well as the procedures involved in data collection and analysis.

### **2.1 Research design**

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study. Creswell's (2009) comments on qualitative research procedures, as relying on text and image data as well as being fundamentally interpretive, underpin our methodological choice. Neuman (2000) adds that a qualitative design facilitates the unearthing of subtle shades of meaning as it enables the pulling together of divergent or dispersed information. Thus, the design suits this work which seeks to analyse a hypermodal text. Nevertheless, although qualitative research was the flagship methodology in this study, we also conducted some quantitative analyses (mainly comprising descriptive statistics to provide a rigorous summary of the navigation styles on the selected homepages) in further support of our findings.

### **2.2 Data sample and sampling technique**

The primary data comprise the homepages of universities that are highly ranked, and not necessarily all the universities of the same ranking. To be more precise, by homepages we mean the landing pages of universities’ websites, such as that portrayed in Figure 1.

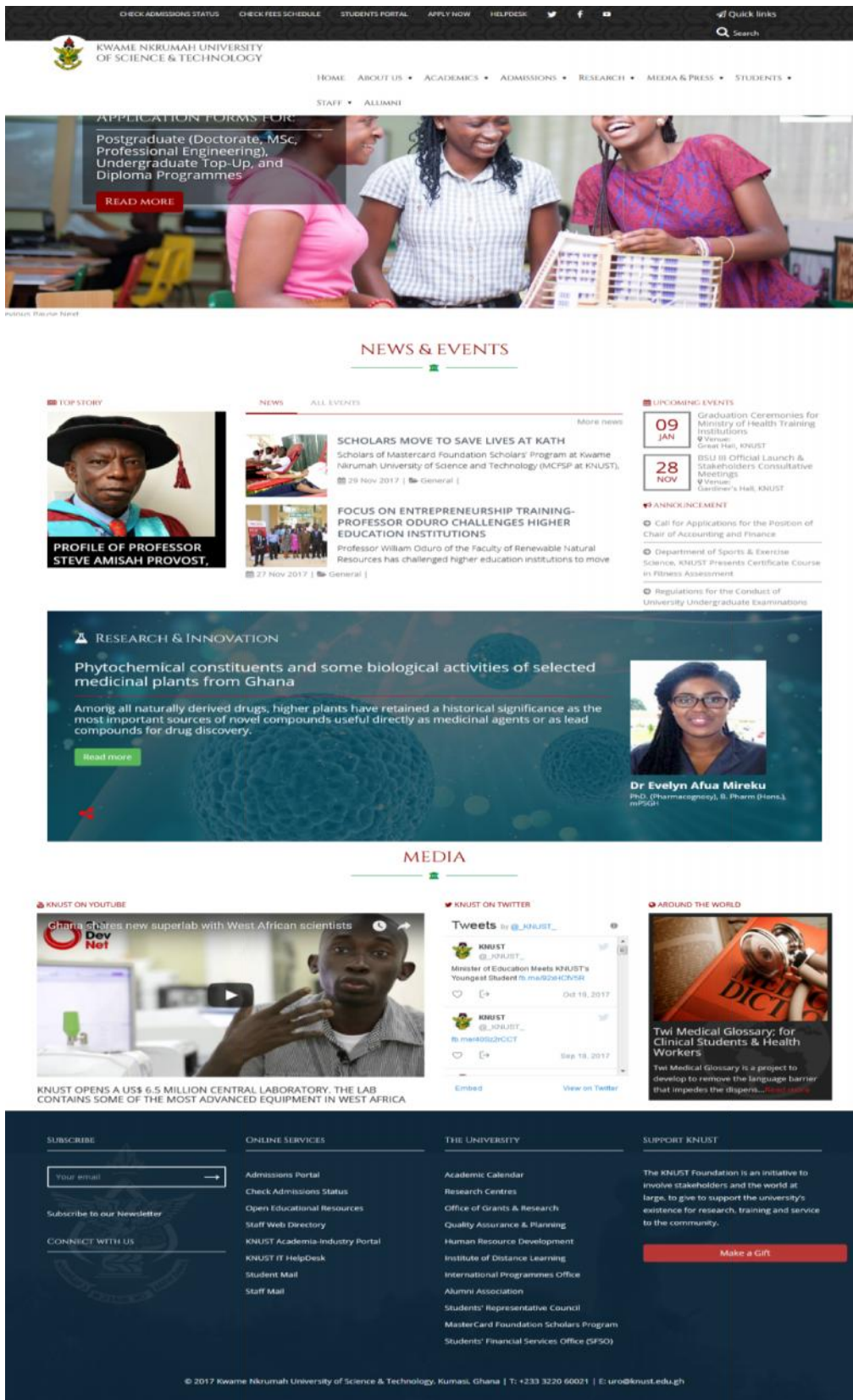


Figure 1. Sample university homepage

The study analysed the homepages of the top three universities in Ghana (UG, KNUST, and UCC). The sample size was determined based on the driving research question of this

study. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the three university homepages as they possess the appropriate characteristics of interest to this study (being the top ranking universities in Ghana).

### **2.3 Data collection procedure**

The primary data of this study (i.e. universities' websites) are readily available on the internet, so there were no accessibility issues. Prior to collecting the data, we first visited university ranking sites to ascertain the ranking of universities in Ghana. Pursuant to gathering this information, we visited the homepages of those universities, using their website addresses. The list of universities whose homepages were utilised for this study was compiled on December 7 2017.

Although Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), QS World Universities Ranking (QS WUR), and Times Higher Education World Universities Rankings (THE WUR) have all been identified as world-level university ranking systems (Atai & Asadnia, 2016; Hyland, 2011), Ranking Web of Universities (Webometrics) was chosen. Webometrics was chosen for two main reasons: its focus on the information on webpages of institutions for ranking instead of a reliance on the subjective views of individuals (expert reviewers); of the four ranking sites, only Webometrics presents results for ranking Ghanaian universities. While QS WUR and THE WUR only feature University of Ghana on their list, ARWU, for example, does not feature any Ghanaian university in their ranking list. Therefore, Webometrics was solely relied upon for results about the top 3 Ghanaian universities. The January 2017 edition of Webometrics suggests UG, KNUST, and UCC as the top three universities in Ghana with the following respective positions on a global basis: 1655, 2147 and 3355.

Given Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) concern, in order to avoid not taking into account the materiality of the medium, data were not collected and analysed on printed sheets. Instead, the homepages of the universities were regularly visited for analysis until the analysis was completed. We must emphasise that no significant changes were made on the homepages of the concerned universities for as long as the analysis lasted (that is, December 2017 – January 2018). For illustrative purposes, Nimbus Capture, a Mozilla Firefox Add-on, and Microsoft Office 2010 were used to take snapshots of the three homepages used in this paper.

### **2.4 Analytical framework and data analysis procedure**

In this study, we applied frameworks rooted in multimodality for the analysis of the selected universities' homepages. The study essentially followed the method of analysis used by Zhang and O'Halloran (2012) in analysing university websites, while Kress and van

Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual grammar (VG) was utilised to analyse the visual semiotic elements of the homepages featured in the corpus. Thus, while Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) approach served as the theoretical framework for the analysis of the visual cues, Zhang and O'Halloran's (2012) helped us to undertake a comprehensive analysis of both the hypertextual and multimodal affordances of the homepages. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) postulate that the meaning of images can be analysed by attending to the representational, interpersonal and compositional metafunctions in an integrative fashion. Due to space constraints, the analysis of images will be limited to the representational metafunction.

According to Zhang and O'Halloran's (2012, p. 92) two-dimensional hypermodal analytical model, "the semiotic design of a homepage includes how the gate should look (which comprises the features of the homepage in the reading mode) and how the gate should facilitate navigation (which covers the action potentials that provide access into the website in the navigational mode)." Thus, the analysis of the homepages selected for this study covers semiotic choices in both reading and navigational modes. In the reading mode, choices among various semiotic resources including images, language, colour, video, audio, typography and layout (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013) can be made in the construction of the homepage. However, in this paper, analysis is limited to choices between images and verbal resources. With regard to the navigational mode, analysis featured 'what is provided to be navigated (navigational content), and how navigation is achieved (navigational style)' (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013).

### **3. Findings and discussion**

#### **3.1 *The reading dimension of the universities' homepages***

##### **3.1.1 *Image analysis***

Following Kindt (2014), we divided the analysis of the images into two parts: the first involves a discussion of the more salient and focal images which are usually placed at the top or top-left part of the homepage (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013); the second involves a general description and categorisation of the other images that temporarily accompany news items on the homepages. Thus, analysis is not limited only to salient images, as performed by Zhang and O'Halloran (2012, 2013). Again, due to space constraints, only one of the salient images will be subjected to detailed analysis.

The analysis of the salient images in the corpus of the Ghanaian universities highlighted speakers at upcoming conferences and students engaged in interaction or other activities as the prominent visual resources. For example, the University of Ghana (UG) homepage has four flashing images: the first is a banner of an upcoming conference that contains three images of speakers; the second is an image of a research report document;

the third is an image of a group of students engaged in a lecture or class interaction; and the fourth involves an image of students, the university crest and logo. The third image (Figure 2), as per Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) model, is dynamic and presents "[u]nfolding actions and events, processes of change, and transitory spatial arrangements."



**Figure 2.** Students in an interactional learning context (UG)

The image in Figure 2 whose relation to the text is one of relay involves a reactional transactional process where the vector is created by the directed eye contact of the participants. The image portrays participants in a friendly interactive environment as indicated by participants' gestures. The locative circumstance is a lecture hall as a place where students identified as doctoral students engage in interactions. Again, the image is non-transactional as the Phenomena that the Reactors in the image behold are absent from the image. One may postulate that the absent Phenomenon is a lecturer or course facilitator whose actions or inactions have elicited the reactions of the represented participants. Thus, the image portrays students to be at the centre of the teaching-learning experience and UG's commitment to let students take control of their own learning.

Just like UG, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) features four salient flashing images on its homepage. The first one is an image of a woman working on her laptop (serving as background to an online fees payment notice to students), and the second is an image of the university community. The third one (Figure 3) is an image of female students conversing over a classroom task while the fourth presents a female student dressed for a graduation ceremony. The third image (Figure 3) is a narrative image emphasising KNUST's association with Science and Technology education in the country.



**Figure 3.** Students conversing over a classroom task (KNUST)

It is a complex image with two embedded narrative structures. First, it highlights three Actors (students) involved in a unidirectional transactional action process where their hands and body form vectors directed towards the passive Goal. The Goal which hints that the Actors are practising the construction of towers or skyscrapers is crucial in appreciating the image and the superimposed text (which calls for applications to professional Engineering programmes). The locative circumstance (a lecture hall due to the presence of chairs and tables, as well as other seated students) makes the absence of a tutor or facilitator significant, and portrays the school as promoting empowered students in control of their own learning.

Moreover, Figure 3 has a unidirectional transactional reactional process where two of the participants become Reactors, while their gazing (and smiles' exchange) suggests a relation of mutuality between them. Opting for all female Actors who, according to their facial expressions and the completed task (Goal), are successful in their pursuit of such a programme as Engineering, a programme that is usually represented as being the province of men (Zappert, Laraine & Kendyll, 1984), may encourage other female students to apply, thus portraying the university as an all-inclusive space of equal opportunities.

The final homepage in our sample is that of the University of Cape Coast. Unlike the other two universities, the UCC homepage features only one image in a position of salience.

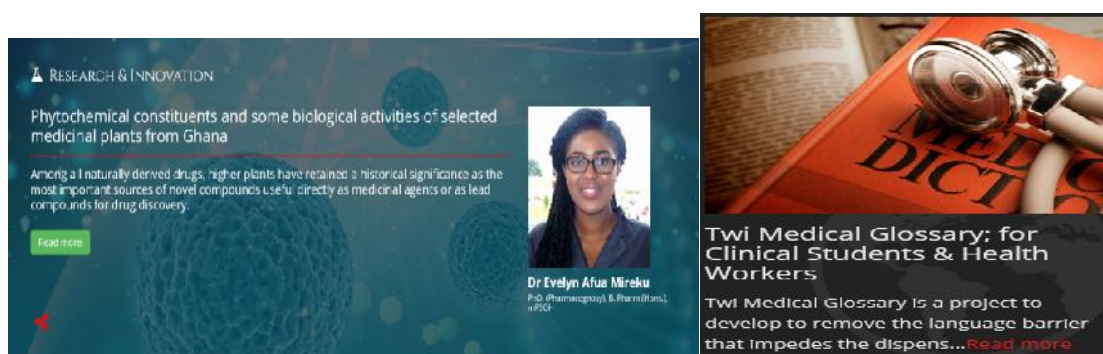


**Figure 4.** Advertising admissions (UCC)

At the time of data collection, only one image was featured on the homepage (Figure 4)—an advertisement for the sale of programmes in sandwich form. The image is underscored by a

caption, the university crest and colours (black and red). The relative salience of the visual emerges in contradistinction to the font size employed in the verbal components. Having analysed the salient images, we move on to the non-salient images on the homepages under scrutiny.

One realises, again, that conceptual images outnumber narrative images on the Ghanaian universities' homepages. The featured conceptual images usually partake of the Classificational and Symbolic Suggestive types which realise meaning and identity as derived from within the 'Carrier'.



**Figure 5.** Promoting research (KNUST)

These conceptual images on Ghanaian universities' homepages usually highlight personalities, but scarcely any research output, research facilities or significant researchers (only KNUST has two images of research value in Figure 5). The personalities often include visitors from foreign nations and universities, while the images highlight their relations with such personalities; the Ghanaian universities attempt to portray themselves as gaining recognition from the outside world—leading to the enhancement of their corporate identities.



**Figure 6.** Students in learning situations (UCC)

Furthermore, the dynamic and narrative images on the Ghanaian universities' homepages usually portray students in teaching and learning situations; and university officials engaged in interactions with foreign visiting delegates. The images in Figure 6 show students being engaged in their academic activities.

The first image which underlies a bidirectional transactional reactional process (with the gazes of the Reactors forming vectors in their directionality towards the Phenomena) portrays students in a formal teaching and learning environment where their peers take on the roles of lecturers, presenters and facilitators, thus suggesting the university's capacity building orientation.

The second image in Figure 6, however, presents a unidirectional transactional action process where the hands, heads and bodies of the Actors form vectors onto the passive Goals (laptop and book placed on Actors' laps). Interestingly, this image suggests that, even in informal locative circumstances where there is lack of supervision and monitoring from lecturers, students are still motivated and committed to academic work. The images, thus, portray the university space as an involving academic environment.

Ghanaian universities' highlighting the recognition gained from the West in asserting their identity is also suggested through the narrative images in Figures 7a,b. Here, the main Actors, in a bidirectional action process (vectors formed by hands), shake hands, perhaps upon sealing an agreement.



**Figure 7a.** Promoting international relations (UG)



**Figure 7b.** Promoting international relations (UCC)

### **3.1.2 Analysis of verbal resources**

The analysis of verbal resources on the homepages under scrutiny was performed by attending to word groups and the themes that emerge from these groups. The macro-themes realised from the news titles include staff and faculty (examples include: Provost, Professor Steve Amisah, UG Dons, GAUA, leadership, Professor Oduro, Dr. Evelyn Afua Mireku, Advisors, Supervisors and Examiners); students (examples include: students, scholars); research objects (examples include: medicinal plants); members of the external



community (examples include: Minister of Education, West African Scientists, Six-Member Irish Delegation, Delegation from Auburn University, Phoenix Insurance, Newly Appointed Japanese Ambassador); facilities (examples include: laboratory) and activities (examples include: blood donation, graduation ceremonies, seminar for graduate students, advisors, supervisors and examiners, conferences and lectures, call for papers and call for applications).

Only single entries were encountered for the topical themes 'research objects' and 'facilities'—both of which were present only on KNUST's homepage. The limited number of entries for the topical theme 'research object' may suggest that Ghanaian universities, unlike the National University of Singapore, for example, studied by Zhang and O'Halloran (2012), usually engage in research that concerns socio-economic issues rather than scientific endeavours. The reason for the above observation may be that Ghana, like most developing countries, and unlike developed countries like Singapore, is economically weak and, therefore, lacks the luxury of focusing on technological and scientific endeavours. Consequently, research in Ghana is, instead, mostly geared towards resolving the socio-economic problems bedeviling the country. Again, the scarce incidence of entries for 'facilities' may also suggest that Ghanaian universities tend to emphasise human resources in representing their identities, rather than structural resources or facilities. This may also be attributed to the level of institutions' infrastructural development.

One also notes that the entries for 'members of the external communities' include personalities of high status and influence. Similarly, the activities of Ghanaian universities mainly involve ceremonies (examples include: graduation ceremony for Ministry Of Health Training Institutions) and conferences (examples include: conference on climate, land use, mining and sanitation for sustainable development, 69<sup>th</sup> annual new year school and conference) that lead to deliberations on issues of academic and national concern.

Moreover, although one might tend to think that since the homepage is promotional, the use of evaluative language or embellishing adjectives would abound in Ghanaian universities' homepages, as found by Hoang and Rojas-Lizana (2015), with regard to the homepage of the University of Melbourne, only three instances of appraisal are encountered (examples include: **\$ 6.5 million central** laboratory; some of the **most advanced** equipment; **super lab**)—all instances occurred only on KNUST's homepage. Thus, the use of adjectives on the homepages of Ghanaian universities is mainly geared towards pre-modifying nouns and specifying identities, rather than elevating or promoting the universities to visitors (examples include: **Professional** certificate, **Stakeholders consultative** meetings, **Graduate modular** programmes)

Hence, visitors may consider the homepages of Ghanaian universities as being more informational, rather than promotional. This semiotic choice is indicative of universities being

on the periphery of the “concept of a marketplace” (Bhatia, 2005). Tomaskova (2011) discovered a similar employment of verbal resources in Czech universities: “Assertions of teaching and research excellence are briefer, and do not employ such a wide variety of evaluative adjectives” (p. 61).

### ***3.2 The navigational dimension of the universities’ homepages***

As previously mentioned, the homepage is not simply consumed by readers (as is customary with traditional texts), but allows them to interact with it and construct their own reading paths via semiotic resources that facilitate navigation. This section focuses on how visitors’ reading paths are facilitated by attending to navigation content (what is provided to be navigated) and navigation style (how navigation is achieved).

#### ***3.2.1 Navigation content analysis of Ghanaian universities’ homepages***

Although the navigation content of a homepage is realised through the generic and specific links which are similar to what Zhang and O’Halloran (2012) describe as information categories and featured links, the analysis that is offered here is restricted only to generic links. “A link may be defined as a clickable object (for example appearing as an icon or as underlined text as in ‘read-more’) which allows the navigator to go from one place to another on a web page or website” (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005, p. 132).

Comparing generic links to entries in a traditional library catalogue (in which case the entries are organised in subject terms), Askehave and Nielsen (2005) observe that generic links not only “[p]rovide access to the main topics on a website” but their placement (usually at the top section of web documents) leave them “with a particular high information value as ideal and salient information that is in line with the above-mentioned pragmatic relevance value of links in general” (p. 133). Following Kindt (2014), we conducted a qualitative content analysis of homepages, to unearth the information emphasised by the universities under study.

The findings of the content analysis showed that Ghanaian universities homepages opt for practical information, such as About us, Admissions and Aid, Community Information (students, faculty, staff, parents, visitors, alumni etc), Education (schools and programmes, online learning, learning initiatives), Campus Life (athletics, arts, students activities, Campus new) and Research, rather than Impact, and Corporate Social Responsibility which were present on the homepages studied by Kindt (2004). It must be pointed out, however, that only KNUST features information on Campus life which is absent from the homepages of the other two Ghanaian institutions. Moreover, Ghanaian institutions maintain their presence on a number of social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Linked-in, thus affording to extend their reach towards a global market

### 3.2.2 Navigation style analysis of Ghanaian universities' homepages

Access to the navigation content of homepages is usually facilitated by semiotic resources known as navigation styles—plain text, icons, buttons, and navigational images (Jones, 2007 cited in Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013). Citing Nielsen and Loranger (2006) to define affordance as “[w]hat can be done to an object”, Zhang and O'Halloran (2013, p. 480) contend “navigational styles have different degrees of affordance.” Thus, they intimate that buttons (and banners in the shape of buttons), for example, have the highest affordance since one is aware that clicking on them results in actions; plain texts have high affordance when in blue colour; icons enjoy high affordance in situations where viewers have knowledge of their meanings; and images have low affordance since their clickability is unknown until the mouse is rolled over them.

In line with Zhang and O'Halloran (2012), the number of clickable items (use of explicit navigation style) on the homepages of Ghanaian universities is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Statistical summary for explicit navigation styles on Ghanaian universities' homepages

Navigation Style	Ghanaian Universities	
	Total	%
Plain Text	219	67.2
Icons	23	7.1
Buttons	22	6.7
Navigation Images	16	4.9
Arrow Signs	46	14.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>100</b>

The findings in Table 1 suggest that plain text (67.2%) dominates over the rest of the clickable items on the homepages of the Ghanaian universities, whereas buttons and icons which as per Zhang and O'Halloran (2013) hold the highest affordance, are the least used, with an incidence of 6.7% and 7.1% respectively. Considering these values, it may be surmised that the homepages of Ghanaian universities have low navigational affordances, especially since the plain texts are largely presented in black, rather than blue colour, as hinted by Zhang and O'Halloran (2013). Thus, UCC and KNUST, for example, whose homepages are dominated by plain texts in black rather than blue colour, as presented on UG's homepage, may attract less extensive navigation by visitors.

Finally, the accessibility of information on the Ghanaian universities' homepages is relatively easy, especially as regards KNUST and UG which provide multiple links to sub-pages that concern several demands of the university community. The navigation buttons also feature drop-down menus which offer added navigational convenience.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The current study explored how the three selected Ghanaian universities (namely, UG, KNUST and UCC) project their corporate identities to promote their products and services through an analysis of the hypermodal resources on their institutional homepages. In doing this, the study adopted Zhang and O'Halloran's (2012) hypermodal framework in analysing university websites, while Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual grammar (VG) was utilised in analysing the homepages' visual semiotic elements.

Based on the results of the analyses, it can be concluded that Ghanaian universities' homepages promote an identity of university communities with global recognition that provide environments where learning can thrive. The above sketched identity of Ghanaian universities is aligned with the identity of South African universities in Mafofo and Banda's (2014) paper: "They showcased particular traits of a corporate brand identity, which encompassed highlighting high-quality research and academic credentials, as well as a national and an international reputation" (p. 428).

Clearly, then, although Ghanaian universities have accomplished significant strides in promoting a corporate identity to attract customers, further efforts will have to be made in order to enhance their competitiveness. For instance, Ghanaian universities will need to present university education as a lifestyle and experience (McFall, 2004; O'Halloran, Tan & Marissa, 2013 cited in Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013), a vital element which was missing from the data.

To achieve the above, the following recommendations concerning the design of both reading and navigation modes will have to be considered. First, the images on the homepages should portray participants engaged in diverse activities (students, for example, are dominantly portrayed in teaching-learning situations, but not in co-curricular activities such as sports and arts). Second, Ghanaian universities need to think of the homepage more as a promotional platform rather than an informational one. Consequently, the language used on the homepages should include emotive and evaluative linguistic choices, as regularly featured in promotional discourses (Hoang and Rojas-Lizana, 2015; Tomaskova, 2011). Moreover, the navigational content should include universities' impact and corporate social responsibility initiatives, which are instrumental in demonstrating not only universities' engagement with local communities, but also how research activities

contribute to society's well-being (Mautner, 2005). Finally, the navigational style should include more buttons and icons which have been found to have greater affordances, and plain text in blue colours. Likewise, clickable links with information for businesses and other stakeholders such as parents and visitors should be made available, so as to make the universities more vibrant and open to the wider community.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered for further studies. Due to space constraints, the analysis was limited to the representational metafunction. Future studies can also consider the interpersonal metafunction of the hypermodal elements on Ghanaian universities' homepages. Such an enterprise will help unravel the interpersonal dimension of Ghanaian universities' projection of their corporate identities. In other words, it will help answer the question, "How do Ghanaian universities present themselves to relate with their customers?" The interpersonal nature of universities' homepages is immensely significant, as upholding superior customer satisfaction is paramount. Finally, future studies in this area can also consider adopting ethnographic approaches, leading to the use of a combined research methodology. Such a combined research framework may yield information on the motivations of homepages' designers, alongside the meanings of the semiotic choices made in constructing the homepages. In this manner, the perceptions of the universities' target audience can be gathered to help guide analysts in making more comprehensive evaluations of the homepages under scrutiny.

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