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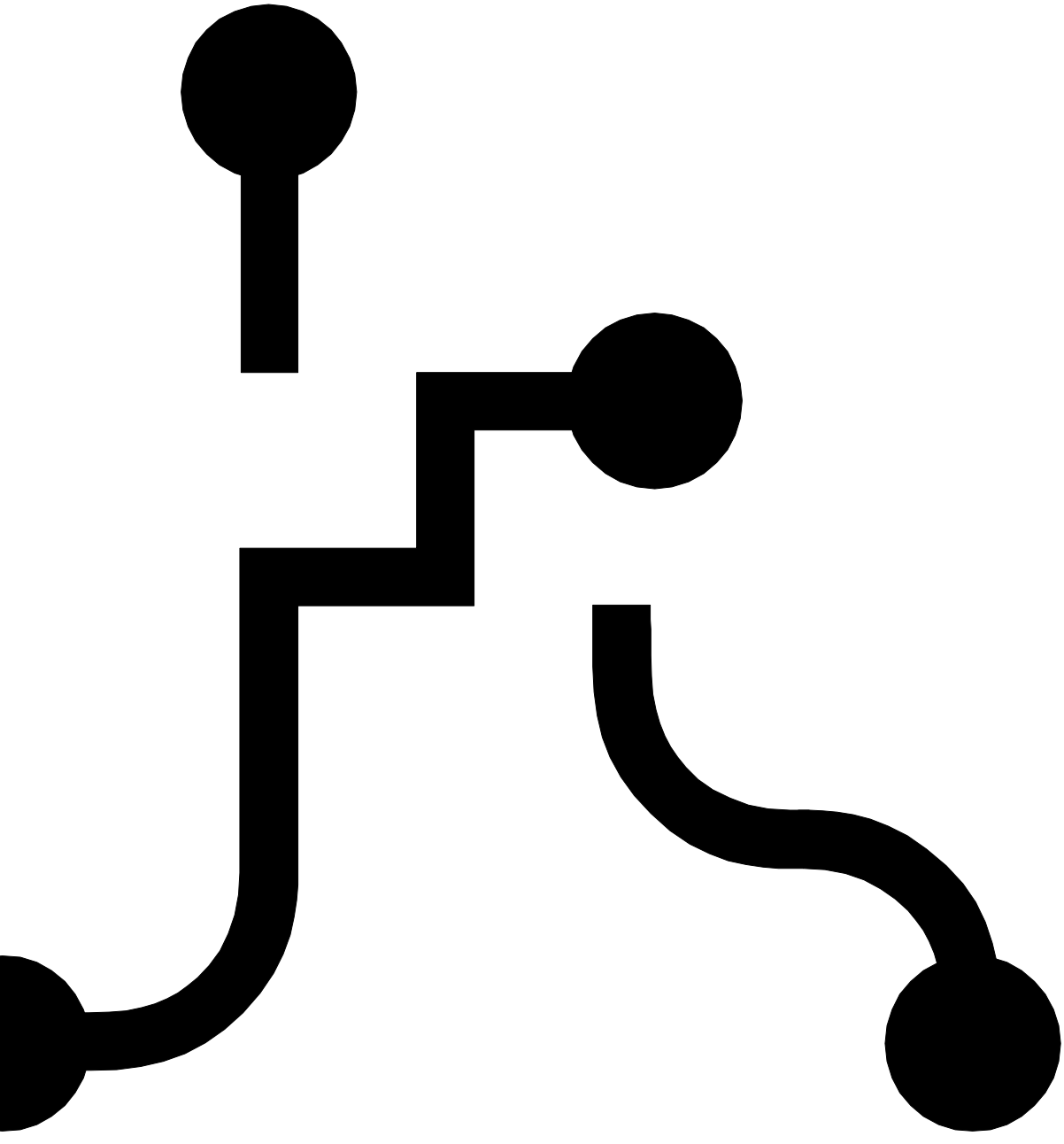

Hypermodality on homepages of public and private universities in Ghana: identity, branding and persuasion

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Abstract

Homepages are official communication platforms through which organizations project their corporate identities for branding and persuasive purposes. This study, therefore, investigates the hypermodal resources employed by Ghanaian public and private universities on their homepages to construct their institutional identities. Data were collected from the homepages of twenty public and twenty private universities. Utilizing Askehave and Neilsen's (2005) hypermodal framework and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar model, the study reveals that both categories of universities represent themselves through imagery related to infrastructure, internal and external stakeholders, and student lifestyles. However, public universities tend to highlight research-related events, marketing strategies, and women's contributions, whereas private universities prominently feature awards, student achievements, and alumni success stories. These findings contribute to the existing scholarship on hypermodality and the marketing of higher education.

Keywords: Multimodality, Visual Grammar, Hypermodality, Advertising, Corporate Identity

0. Introduction

Hypermodal discourse is gradually gaining ground in contemporary research. It encompasses multimodality and hypertextuality (Lemke, 2002). This form of discourse has risen to prominence as communication has shifted from analog or traditional forms to digital platforms, driven by advancements in science and technology. Kemp's (2021) report indicates that out of the global population of 7.83 billion, approximately 4.66 billion (54%) were internet users as of January 2021. This statistic illustrates the vast reach of digital communication.

The website has, therefore, emerged over the past few decades as an indispensable medium for institutions, including government agencies and universities, for promotional and persuasive communication (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2012). The accessibility of the internet makes institutional websites principal channels for communication and identity construction. To effectively present their identities, institutions employ a combination of semiotic (visual) and verbal resources. The information presented on websites, especially on homepages, projects an institution's corporate identity. Institutions carefully select linguistic and semiotic elements that project their desired identities (Hyland, 2012).

Fletcher (2006) states that university homepages play a critical role in establishing institutional identity in a highly competitive educational landscape. Urciuoli (2003) also emphasizes that universities use texts and images on their homepages to position and distinguish themselves from competitors. This implies that the semiotic and linguistic features presented on homepages are deliberately chosen to construct and project corporate identities (Mafofo & Banda, 2014). Balmer (2001, p. 241) defines corporate identity as "how an organization's identity is revealed through its representations, external behavior, communications, as well as through symbolism." It involves the organization's self-image and its enacted social relations through semiotic, visual, and verbal resources.

Ayaawan (2018) argues that establishing a corporate identity is crucial to the survival of any organization, as it forms the foundation for interactions between the corporate entity and the world. In response to increasing competition, universities have adopted corporate advertising strategies to rebrand themselves. As Bhatia (2005) asserts, "of all the genres which have invaded the territorial integrity of most professional and academic genres, advertising clearly stands out as the most prominent instrument of colonization" (quoted in Kong, 2006, p. 775). Hwang et al. (2003) consider corporate homepages as multifunctional platforms that communicate institutional identity and promote their services.

Various scholars (e.g., Zhang & O'Halloran, 2012; Banda & Mafofo, 2014; Tetteh, 2018; Tetteh & Afful, 2020) have analyzed academic homepages from a marketing perspective. Historically, promoting institutional identities and advertising services were limited to non-educational entities like banks and food companies (Constantines & Stagno, 2011). However, due to globalization, internationalization, and the massification of education,

universities are now compelled to build corporate identities and market their services. Knowledge is presented as a commodity, and students are perceived as consumers (Tetteh & Afful, 2020).

Although the corporate identities of universities have been widely researched in Asia and Europe (Schnaidner, Gu & Rantatalo, 2020; Zhang, 2017; Tamaskova, 2015; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013; Saichaie, 2011), research in Africa remains limited (e.g., Edu-Buandoh, 2010; Mafofo & Banda, 2014; Tetteh, 2018; Tetteh & Afful, 2020; Ayaawan, 2021), with most studies focusing solely on public universities. This paper, therefore, explores the similarities and differences in how both public and private universities construct their identities through the multimodal and hypertextual elements on their homepages.

1. Universities in Ghana

Ghanaian universities are categorized into two main groups: public and private. Public universities are accredited, degree-awarding institutions established by the government. The first public university, the University College of the Gold Coast (now the University of Ghana), was founded in 1948 under the mentorship of the University of London.

In 1960, growing industrialization and technological advancement necessitated the establishment of science-oriented institutions. The University of Science Education (now the University of Cape Coast) was established in 1962, followed by Accra Technical Institute, which became Accra Polytechnic in 1963. Subsequently, polytechnics were created across all ten regions, offering three-year programs leading to Higher National Diplomas (HNDs).

In 2012, the Ghanaian government converted all polytechnics into technical universities. Akanpaadgi and Mumuni (2021) attribute this change to factors such as low enrolment, lack of progression pathways for polytechnic graduates, disparities in public sector placement, and the migration of polytechnic staff to universities. Though public universities were initially state-funded, the current system requires cost-sharing between the government and the institutions (Bingab et al., 2016). This change has pushed public universities to adopt marketing strategies on their homepages to create strong corporate identities, attract potential students, and generate revenue (Bingab et al., 2016; Edu-Buandoh, 2010; Tetteh & Afful, 2020).

Private universities, in contrast, are non-governmental, accredited, degree-awarding institutions, often affiliated with larger public or international universities. They operate on a system where students bear the full cost of their education. Ghana's 1987 liberalization policies enabled private entrepreneurs to invest in tertiary education, leading to a significant increase in private universities. As of 2020, the National Accreditation Board reports 84 accredited private universities in Ghana.

2. Social semiotic approach to hypermodality

Communication has evolved from relying on a single mode to incorporating multimodal forms, implying that meaning is now realized through more than one mode (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Kress (2004, p. 12) explains that different modes offer "different potentials for making meaning; these then have a fundamental effect on the choice of mode selected in a specific instance of communication." In other words, different modes contribute to or foreground the meaning of a text; therefore, selecting the appropriate mode is essential to effectively convey the intended message to the target audience. This underscores the need to fully understand the various modes employed in a discourse to complete the communication process. Consequently, scholars have proposed several frameworks to help reveal the meanings conveyed through all modes such as images, sounds, videos, languages, and signs within a single discourse (Norris, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

The social semiotic approach, particularly the visual grammar framework, is deemed suitable for this study. The term "grammar" here differs from the formalist view, which considers grammar as a set of rules that define language structure (i.e., what is permissible or not). Instead, "grammar" is described as a network of systems or an interrelated set of options for meaning-making (Halliday, 1994, p. 192). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) maintain that, like linguistic representations, images also have distinct modes of representation, communication, and conventions through which meaning is constructed. Building on Halliday (1994), Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identified three metafunctions represented in Figure 1.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)	**Visual Grammar (VG)**
Ideational	Representational
Interpersonal	Interactional
Textual	Compositional

Figure 1. Three strands of metafunctions in SFG and VG.

It has been established that discourses have shifted from simple multimodal frames to a newer discourse that is a product of the synergy between traditional and digital communication modes (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005; Saichaie, 2011; Kindt, 2014). Kress (2006) describes this new form of discourse (i.e. hypermodal discourse) as one that integrates traditional, multimodal, and hyperlink resources, and is primarily visible on websites. Due to the nature of this new discourse, Askehave and Nielsen (2005) compared web genres to their print counterparts and identified several unique features. Similar to Finnemann (1999), they found that webpages operate on two main dimensions: reading and navigation modes. Finnemann (1999, p. 34) explains that the reading mode serves an introductory function and "leaves the user in a traditional reader position with

sequential reading as the guiding principle," whereas the navigation mode fulfills a gateway function, allowing users to create their own reading paths (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2012). Based on these two functionalities, Askehave and Nielsen (2005) proposed a two-dimensional framework.

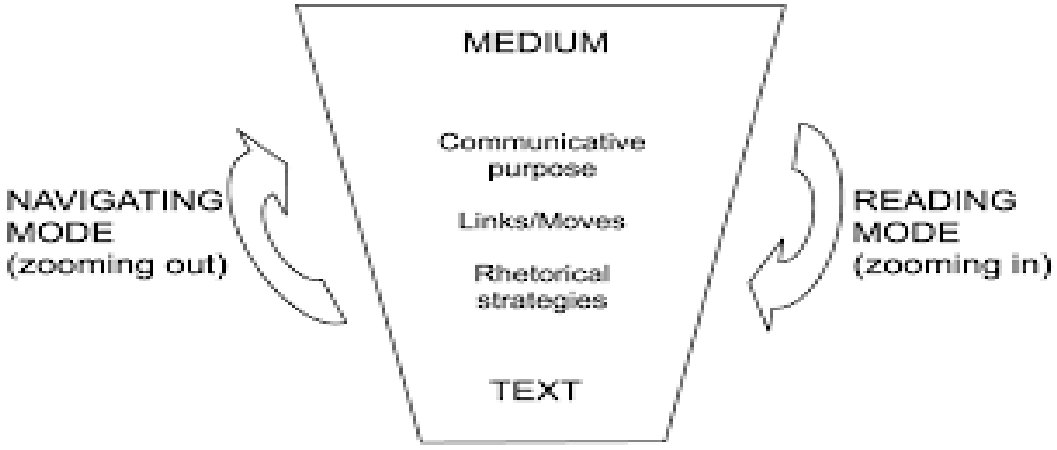


Figure 2. Askehave and Nielsen's (2005) two-dimensional genre model.

This framework divides the webpage/homepage into two distinct components. The first, the reading mode, allows researchers to apply any textual or visual analytical theory to examine content. The second, the navigation mode, refers to how users interact with clickable elements to create a reading experience. Using this framework, the present study analyzes how textual, semiotic, and navigational resources are used to project the corporate identities of universities.

2.1 Previous studies on identity projections

There is a limited number of studies focusing specifically on institutional homepages (e.g., Tang, 2011; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013; Mafofo & Banda, 2014; Tomaskova, 2015; Hui & Lui, 2017; Tetteh, 2018; Kouritzin et al., 2020). However, a few studies (e.g., Saichaie, 2011; Kindt, 2014; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2012; Tetteh & Afful, 2020) have examined these homepages through a hypermodal lens. A review of these works suggests that homepage studies generally fall into two main categories: those that explore the projection of corporate identity and those situated within the context of marketization.

Several studies have investigated corporate identity projections on university homepages worldwide. For example, Tetteh and Afful (2020) examined how three Ghanaian public universities (i.e. the University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and the University of Cape Coast) represented themselves. The study found that these institutions portrayed themselves as intense academic environments that emphasize human capital over infrastructural facilities. Zhang (2017), in a study of Chinese university homepages, discovered that the projected corporate identity was traditional and authoritative. Similarly, Kindt (2014) analyzed American university websites

and found a strong emphasis on community building. Saichaie and Morphew (2014) examined the textual and visual elements of 12 college websites, concluding that each institution projected an identity aligned with its mission statement.

Some researchers have also examined cross-cultural variations in homepage representations. Tetteh (2018), for instance, compared the homepages of Ghanaian and Anglo-American public universities, revealing that Ghanaian sites were more informative and student-centered but less promotional than their Western counterparts. Tomaskova (2015) compared university homepages from the UK, North America, and the Czech Republic. The study found that institutions such as Oxford and Harvard presented themselves as facilitators rather than authoritative figures, avoiding portrayals of students as passive recipients. Conversely, Czech universities emphasized historical traditions while embracing modern technologies. Zhang and O'Halloran (2012), in a comparative analysis of the National University of Singapore and Tsinghua University, found that the former emphasized its vibrant community, while the latter portrayed itself as a traditional and authoritative institution (p. 15).

To date, limited attention has been paid to comparing universities within the same national context. One such study was conducted by Hoang and Rohas-Lizana (2015), who analyzed how two Australian universities represented themselves on their homepages. They found that although both institutions promoted a global identity, the University of Melbourne emphasized its international prestige, whereas Macquarie University focused more on national relevance. While research on university homepages is not new in Africa generally, and in Ghana specifically (e.g., Mafofo & Banda, 2014; Tetteh, 2018; Tetteh & Afful, 2020; Ayaawan, 2021), there remains a research gap in exploring the similarities and differences in how public and private universities in Ghana project their corporate identities. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the hypermodal resources employed by selected public and private universities in Ghana.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

The homepages of selected public and private universities in Ghana constituted the data for this study. The research team visited these homepages and collected hypermodal and multimodal resources. The dataset comprised all flash and static images found on the homepage's main section. Screenshots of all images were captured using both a mobile phone and a laptop. Verbal content was manually transcribed into a field notebook, after which thematic groupings and classifications were performed. Additionally, data on navigational content and styles were gathered by interacting with the websites—clicking on images and links to understand navigation paths. In total, 106 images, 106 texts, and 133 navigation styles were gathered from public universities, while 96 images, 96 texts,

and 157 navigation styles were obtained from private universities. This yielded a combined dataset of 202 images, 202 texts, and 290 navigation styles.

3.2 Data analysis procedures

To facilitate analysis, all data extracts were coded with tag numbers: “PBU” for public universities and “PVU” for private universities. The two-dimensional hypermodal framework was employed for the analysis (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005), which requires the data to be examined in two parts: the reading mode and the navigation mode.

For the reading mode, Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) model of Visual Grammar (VG) was applied to analyze the form, meaning, and function of visual resources. Specifically, the representational metafunction was used to identify and categorize the types of processes –conceptual, narrative, or classificational – and to interpret what these processes signified in real-world contexts. Images were grouped and discussed based on visual and thematic similarities and differences. Finally, all visual cues were tabulated to draw general representative conclusions.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data revealed notable similarities and differences between public and private universities in Ghana in terms of corporate ethos.

4.1 Public vs. private universities’ representation on their homepages

This section describes and categorizes the images featured on university homepages. Table 1 presents quantitative data on the representational metafunctions of all 202 images from both public and private university homepages.

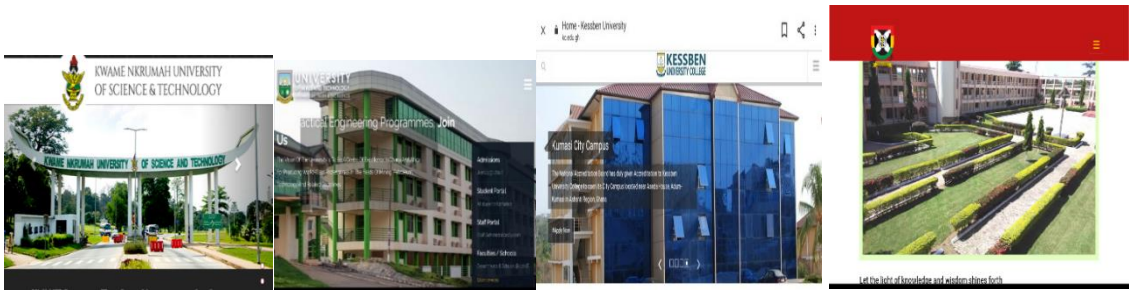
Table 1. The representational metafunction.

Processes	**Public Uni.**	**%**	**Private Uni.**	**%**
Narrative	39	36.7	51	54.8
Conceptual	57	53.9	40	43.1
Text only	10	9.4	5	2.1
Total	**106**	100	**96**	100

The data shows that both categories of universities employed different representational metafunctions. Table 2 reveals that the conceptual process (53.9%) dominated public university homepages, while the narrative process (36.7%) was less prevalent. This finding supports Saichaie and Morphew's (2014) claim that universities prominently utilize the conceptual process. Conversely, private universities favored the narrative process (54.8%) over the conceptual process (43.1%).

4.2 Similarities in the representational metafunction

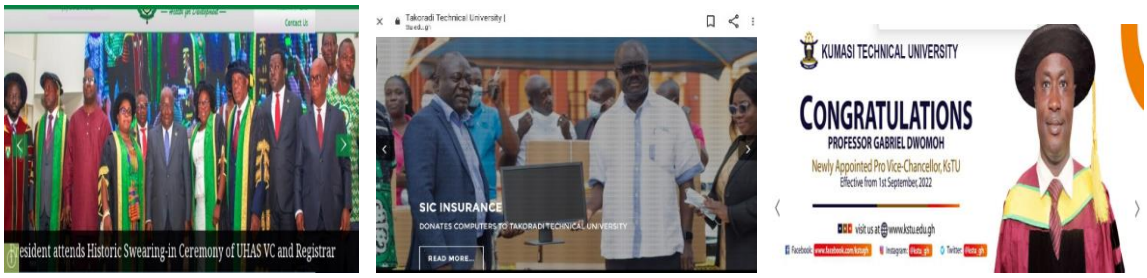
The analysis revealed that both types of universities employed the analytic process (e.g., Figure PBU 01) and the symbolic conceptual process (e.g., Figures PBU 02, PVU 01, and PVU 02) to highlight their physical infrastructure. They used either one or both processes to showcase their infrastructure, layout, and the surrounding greenery.



Figures PBU 01, PBU 02, PVU 01, PVU 02). Infrastructure and layout of universities.

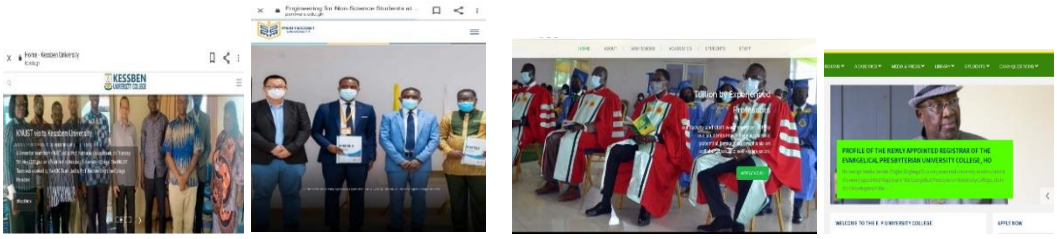
Public universities employed both the analytical process (PBU 01) and the conceptual process (PBU 02) to display their main buildings, gates, and surroundings. Private universities, however, used only the conceptual process for this purpose. These images often featured superimposed texts such as "KNUST is a world-class center of excellence…" and "The vision of the university as a center of excellence in Ghana and Africa…". Statistically, sixteen (16) images from public and twelve (12) from private universities showcased their surroundings. This likely indicates that both types of universities aim to convey modern infrastructure and conducive environments for teaching and learning. The universities thereby construct identities as providers of world-class infrastructure, tutorship, and academic opportunities. These findings align with those of Saichaie (2011), Zhang and O'Halloran (2013), Kindt (2014), and Tetteh and Afful (2020). Kindt (2014) notes that such imagery signifies openness and a commitment to providing a holistic and supportive academic environment.

Secondly, both categories of universities highlighted individuals of high academic or social status using either the symbolic conceptual process (e.g., PBU 03, PBU 05, PVU 03, PVU 04, PVU 06) or the action narrative process (e.g., PBU 04, PVU 05). These individuals include internal members and external dignitaries such as the President of Ghana or government ministers.



Figures PBU 03, PBU 04, PBU 05. Representation of internal and external members – public universities.

External individuals depicted in public university images included corporate donors (e.g., SIC in PBU 04). Private universities showcased visits from affiliated institutions such as KNUST (PVU 03), Coventry University, or international organizations like the TAISE Group (PVU 04). Staff members such as Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Deans, and Registrars were featured wearing academic gowns (PBU 05) or formal attire (PVU 06). These representations underscore both universities' efforts to highlight institutional affiliations, recognition, and the presence of competent staff, thus reinforcing a trustworthy brand image. These findings are consistent with Tetteh and Afful's (2020) conclusion that Ghanaian university homepages showcase high-status individuals.



Figures PVU 03, PVU 04, PVU 05, PVU 06. Representation of internal and external members – private universities.

Furthermore, both categories of universities showcased international students, reflecting institutional diversity. Public universities used the conceptual classificational process (e.g., PBU 06, PBU 07), sometimes with superimposed text such as "Benin students arrive at HTU" or "international students." In contrast, private universities employed the transactional narrative process, portraying students waving flags (PVU 07), participating in practical sessions (PVU 08), or highlighting buildings adorned with various national flags.

Figures PBU 06, PBU 07, PVU 07, PVU 08. Representation of international students.

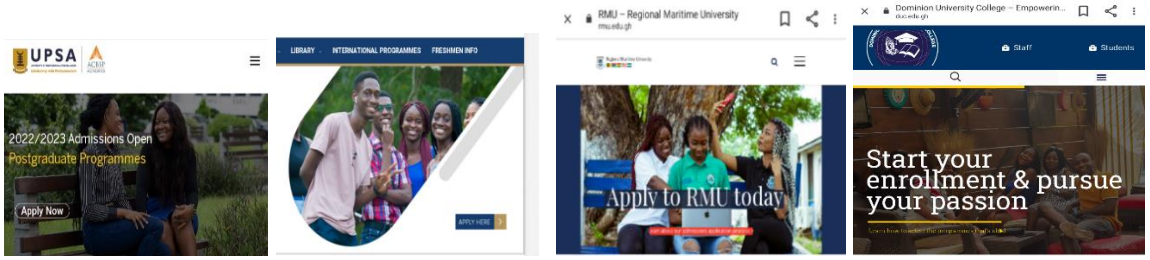
Generally, all universities positioned genders symmetrically. Zhang and O'Halloran (2013) interpret such symmetrical representation, along with smiles and flag-waving, as indicative of global orientation. These displays reflect a commitment to diversity and frame universities as international, inclusive communities (Kindt, 2014). Thus, both institutions project identities of global relevance.

Both public and private universities also used the unidirectional transactional action process to depict academic and practical student engagement (e.g., PBU 07, PBU 08, PVU 09, PVU 10). These images show students in labs, classrooms, and informal settings such as lawns. Specifically, eleven (11) images from public universities depicted informal settings, while twenty-five (25) images from private universities portrayed students in both formal (e.g., classrooms, libraries, labs) and informal contexts.

Figures PBU 08, PBU 09, PVU 09, PVU 10. Depictions of learning environments.

In these images, students are often shown in small groups, interacting with educational tools (e.g., laptops, machines, books). These portrayals suggest a focus on problem-solving, leadership, teamwork, and ethical behavior. The depiction of well-resourced libraries and modern equipment aligns both universities with the discourse on STEM education, further reinforcing their identities as providers of cutting-edge academic resources and environments conducive to personal academic pursuits.

Additionally, the bi-directional transactional (PBU 010) and non-transactional (PBU 011) narrative processes were used to depict student lifestyles. Both categories of universities showcased students interacting socially (e.g., through eye contact or gestures), suggesting a relaxed, interactive campus environment.



Figures PBU 010, PBU 011, PVU 011, PVU 012. Depictions of student social life.

Quantitatively, public and private universities used fifteen (15) and thirty-three (33) images respectively to capture student social interaction. Students were seen chatting (PBU 010), standing in groups (PBU 011), taking selfies (PVU 011), or socializing in casual settings like bars (PVU 012). These images frame university campuses as spaces for social growth and well-being, promoting a balanced student experience. These findings align with the assertions of Zhang & O'Halloran (2012), Kindt (2014), and Tetteh & Afful (2020) that student lifestyles are an important aspect of university branding.

Both public and private universities also depicted partnerships and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). Two relevant images, PBU 012 and PVU 013, demonstrate this.

Figures PBU 012 and PVU 013. MOU agreements.

Public universities employed a bi-directional narrative action process, while private universities used a non-transactional narrative to represent MOUs with institutions or international companies. Hand gestures such as fist bumps (due to COVID-19) in PBU 012 or book exchanges in PVU 013 symbolized agreements. Clicking on PBU 012 reveals text indicating faculty and student exchange opportunities. PVU 013 promotes employment and internship prospects with the TIAST Group. These representations suggest that both universities actively pursue international partnerships and opportunities for their students, reinforcing their identities as globally competitive institutions.

The analysis concludes that all image types (i.e. narrative or conceptual) project the universities as "idyllic havens" (Hartley & Morphew, 2008, p. 677). Visually, they portray serene, green campuses with state-of-the-art architecture and facilities. Indoor environments like classrooms and labs appear well-ventilated and fully equipped.

Moreover, students are consistently shown as happy and healthy, reinforcing the image of a nurturing academic space.

4.3 Differences in the representational metafunction

Public and private universities arguably converge and diverge in terms of their visions, missions, and ideologies. The commonalities were addressed in the preceding section; the differences are discussed in this section. These distinctions drive competition, innovation, strategies, and diverse policies observed in Ghana's educational and knowledge economies. The data revealed that while public universities preferred to display images of their gates and campus views, private universities showcased more images of their internal members.

In terms of infrastructure and physical surroundings, public universities predominantly displayed gates and campus views—as seen in PBU 01, PBU 017, PBU 029, and PBU 030—more frequently than private universities. However, private universities emphasized the display of magnificent buildings and infrastructure, as illustrated in PVU 02, PVU 019, and PVU 021. Additionally, while public universities often displayed newly appointed officials (e.g., PBU 025 and PBU 026), private universities featured more general academic staff members, as seen in PVU 05.

Statistically, ten (10) out of sixteen (16) physical infrastructure images focused on gates (see PBU 01) and campus views, while nine (9) out of twelve (12) images featuring people highlighted internal (academic) members. These staff members were typically shown in small groups, either seated during a program or graduation ceremony, or standing outdoors, often identified by academic regalia such as gowns and caps. Notably, most images on private university homepages depicted staff in small groups. According to Tang (2011), universities that predominantly display their gates and campus views convey an identity of "what we have," while those that highlight internal staff and small groups project "who we have." This suggests that, akin to Chinese universities, public institutions emphasize their physical assets, while private universities, similar to those in the U.S., focus more on their human capital.

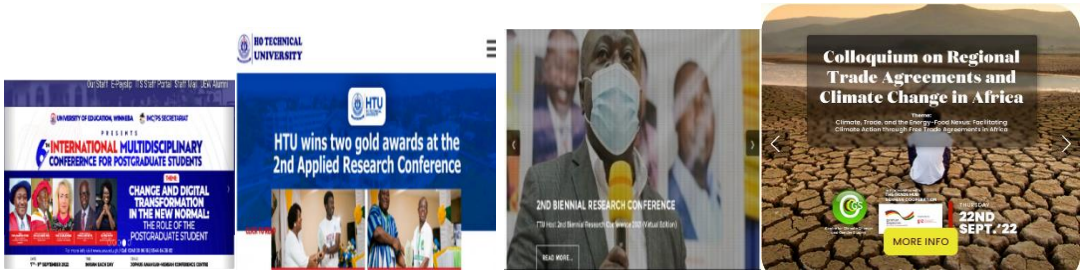
Public universities also appeared to promote an ethos aimed at attracting international students from other African countries. This was evidenced by the presence of flags from African nations in PBU 05, PBU 06, and others, as well as accompanying text such as "Benin students…" and "Zimbabwe's…". This Afrocentric orientation may reflect a Pan-Africanist outlook, in contrast to private universities, which adopt a more Eurocentric presentation, implying parity with overseas institutions in order to attract international students. Private universities displayed a wider range of flags from various continents and featured European representatives, as observed in PVU 07 and PVU 08.

Furthermore, public universities depicted students as being committed to academic work, whereas private universities projected themselves as resource providers. Seventeen (17)

out of twenty-one (21) student images on public university homepages showed students focused on academic materials (books, laptops, papers, machines) in informal settings (e.g., PBU 08 and PBU 09). Conversely, private university images often depicted students in formal settings such as classrooms or libraries, usually learning independently, as seen in PVU 09. Only eight (8) of twenty-five (25) images on private university homepages showed students engaged with academic tools, while seventeen (17) showed them in formal locations, either looking into the camera, at a tutor, or highlighting facilities such as spacious, well-ventilated classrooms.

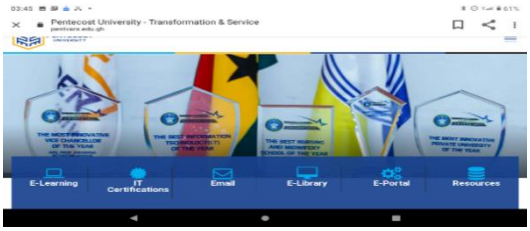
Public universities often portrayed students as self-motivated and capable of independent learning, suggesting an interdependent academic environment. The lack of tutors in these images implies an emphasis on student autonomy (Tetteh & Afful, 2020). Even in informal settings, students were shown holding academic materials. In contrast, private universities more frequently showed tutors interacting with students in modern, well-equipped classrooms, as illustrated in PVU 08.

The findings also reveal that public universities focused on promoting research and related programs, including research awardees, whereas private universities emphasized awards won by the institution or its students. Although private universities frequently displayed such awards on their homepages, public institutions had at least four instances. For example, public universities highlighted student success in the National Energy Quiz and recognized three research award recipients. They used conceptual processes (e.g., PBU 014, PBU 017), bidirectional transactional narratives (e.g., PBU 015), and actional narratives (e.g., PBU 016) to announce academic events involving international scholars.



Figures PBU 014, PBU 015, PBU 016 and PBU 017. Research-related activity promotion.

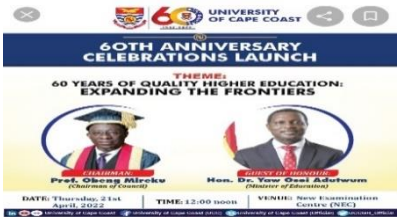
In contrast, private universities used seven (7) images to showcase recent prestigious awards won by institutional representatives. This was achieved through actional narratives (e.g., PVU 013, showing participants holding trophies) and symbolic conceptual processes (e.g., PVU 014).



Figures PVU 013 and PVU 014. Display of awards won from a competition.

Tetteh (2018) observes that such research-related imagery underscores institutional ties with esteemed scholars. Public universities may use these figures to reinforce their international credibility. Similarly, private universities highlight awards to construct prestige (Saichaie, 2011), positioning themselves as distinguished institutions. While public universities emphasized research-related recognition (e.g., PBU 015), private universities featured student-centered award achievements. According to Saichaie (2011), such visual rhetoric serves as a promotional strategy to assert intellectual excellence.

Additionally, public universities celebrated institutional anniversaries, while private universities emphasized graduation ceremonies. Public universities displayed eight (8) images related to anniversaries, while private universities used fifteen (15) images to highlight graduations. Public institutions employed analytical and symbolic conceptual processes (e.g., PBU 015–017) to mark anniversaries. In contrast, private universities used bidirectional narrative processes to highlight student achievement and the awarding of certificates (e.g., PVU 015–016).



Figures PBU 018, PBU 019 and PBU 020. Anniversary celebrations.

PBU 018 featured KNUST's emblem, drawing attention to its rich ecological environment. PBU 019 and PBU 020 showcased keynote speakers—former students who became government ministers or national icons, symbolizing the university's impact. In comparison, private universities presented students smiling (e.g., PVU 017) and receiving awards (e.g., PVU 015–016).

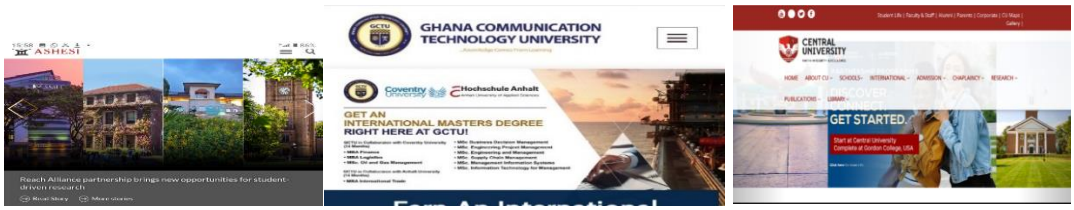
Figures PVU 015, PVU 016 and PVU 017. Display of graduates and graduation ceremonies.

Anniversary images highlight institutional recognition, history, and contributions to society, portraying public universities as established institutions with global impact (e.g., “KNUST: 70 years of Global impact…” and “60 years of quality higher education”). This aligns with Tamaskova’s (2015) observations on Czech universities. Private universities, on the other hand, depict themselves as nurturing environments that facilitate student success and achievement. According to Saichaie (2011), images like PVU 016–018 illustrate how these institutions portray themselves as guiding students to leadership and success, explaining the prevalence of ego-driven advertising on their platforms.

Moreover, public and private universities adopted distinct marketing strategies. Public institutions used informative marketing questions, while private ones focused on international opportunities. The latter included promises of overseas internships, exchange programs, and global certification—strategies appealing to many Ghanaian youth. Public universities used conceptual and narrative images (e.g., PBU 021 and PBU 022) for marketing.

Figures PBU 021 and PBU 022. Marketization strategy.

Private universities, by contrast, employed symbolic conceptual imagery (e.g., PVU 018–020) to depict partnerships with international institutions such as Coventry University and Anhalt University. Imagery included iconic buildings from the University of Toronto, Oxford, and the University of London (PVU 018), a moving ship and a man working on a laptop (PVU 019), and institutional emblems like those of Central University and Gordon College (PVU 020), symbolizing global alliances.



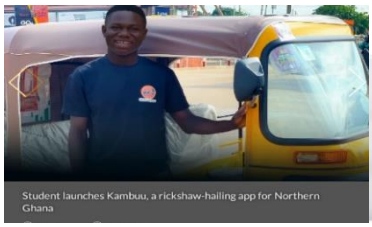
Figures PVU 018, PVU 019 and PVU 020. International opportunities.

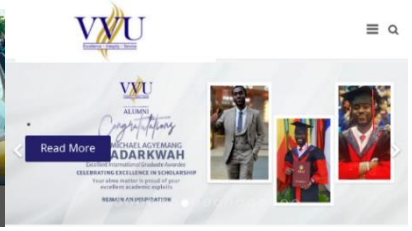
Public universities used marketing-style questions (e.g., “Why study at the University of Ghana?” and “Why UBIDS School of Business?”) to engage readers. This aligns with Saichaie’s (2014) findings on the rise of consumerism in higher education marketing. However, while private university strategies were more overtly promotional, public university messaging was primarily informational (Saichaie, 2014; Zhang & O’Halloran, 2012; Zhang, 2017). Promotional images on private university homepages featured symbols of prestigious international institutions (e.g., PVU 018 and PVU 020). Given the aspiration of many Africans to study abroad, these strategies serve as powerful promotional tools (Kouritzin et al., 2020), as reflected in captions like “get an international degree right here…”.

Finally, public universities also used images to highlight women in traditionally male-dominated professions, while private universities showcased student and alumni achievements. For example, PBU 023 depicted female participants wearing engineering gear (helmet, reflective overalls, gloves), while PBU 024 showed a woman holding a microscope. These conceptual representations emphasize women’s involvement in STEM fields, underscoring efforts to promote gender inclusion in academia.

Figures PBU 023 and PBU 024. Females in STEM professions.

Private universities, on the other hand, employed dynamic action narratives, as seen in PVU 022, or symbolic conceptual processes, as seen in PVU 022 and PVU 023. Figure PVU 021 features a student standing beside a rickshaw named ‘Pragya,’ while the second (PVU 022) and third (PVU 023) images highlight the achievements or awards of students and alumni.





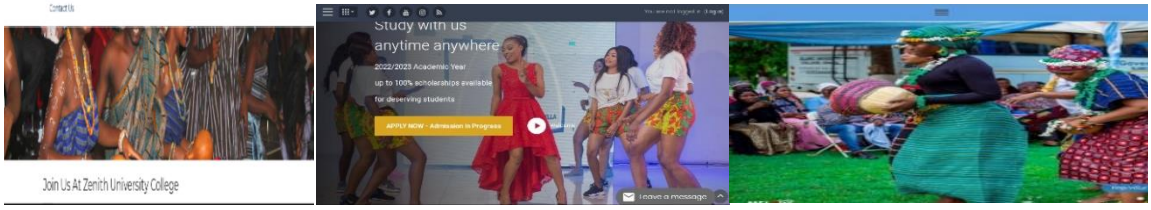
Figures PVU 021, PVU 022 and PVU 023. Evidence of achievements.

Private universities congratulated a student for the successful "launch of Kambuu, a rickshaw-hailing app for the northern part of Ghana," as shown in PVU 021. Figure PVU 023 congratulates an alumnus for "winning an international graduate award" (PVU 022) from Southwest University in China, while Figure PVU 024 also celebrates this achievement. These representations indicate that private universities, unlike public universities, follow the progress of their students through to their post-graduation lives. In contrast, public universities use protective and professional outfits to project an image of providing students with the tools, materials, and technological knowledge necessary to make them confident and capable, as depicted by the folded arms of the participants in PBU 023. Private universities, in turn, present themselves as institutions with unique abilities to offer excellent education and skills, enabling both students and alumni to become problem solvers and entrepreneurs, as seen in PVU 022. They also emphasize fostering academic achievement (e.g., PVU 023) and nurturing individuals who rise to leadership positions, as portrayed in PVU 024.

Furthermore, both types of universities showcased activities and programs they hosted. However, while public universities presented themselves as hosts of national programs, private universities focused on student-centered initiatives. Public universities showcased seven (7) such images using the non-transactional reactional process. This non-transactional process depicts participants forming vectors toward something outside the image, indicating that what the participants were looking at was not captured, as seen in PBU 025, PBU 026, and PBU 027.

Figures PBU 025, PBU 026 and PBU 027. Hosts of national programs.

Private universities, in contrast, presented twelve (12) images of student-centered programs. These images used the action narrative process to show students joyfully engaged in extracurricular activities, such as cultural dances (depicted in PVU 025 and PVU 026) and a pageantry exhibition (depicted in PVU 025). In these images, public universities projected themselves as hosts of national congresses for university administrators (GAUA), as seen in PBU 023, UTAG congresses, or national university games programs, as depicted in PBU 024 and PBU 025. Private universities, however, depicted their spaces as interactive, vibrant, inclusive, and socially engaging, fostering the self-fulfillment of individual students' lifestyles (McFall, 2004).



Figures PVU 024, PVU 025 and PVU 026. Display of extracurricular activities.

It was observed that even when national programs were student-centered, public universities portrayed them as university-centered, as seen in “UEW hosts…,” “KNUST hosts…,” or “UHAS hosts….” Through such projections, Ghanaian public universities adopt a university-centric approach, similar to the position of Tsinghua University in China (Zhang & O’Halloran, 2012). In contrast, the display of activities in private universities emphasizes the idea of a vibrant community, adopting a student-centric position akin to that of universities in Singapore (Zhang & O’Halloran, 2012). Public universities may refrain from displaying such images to present their spaces as academically intensive environments (Tetteh & Afful, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This paper explored how both public and private universities project their corporate identities through hypermodal and multimodal resources on their homepages. The analysis revealed that both types of universities project an image of a conducive academic environment, robust human resources, and a diverse student body. However, in terms of differences, public universities emphasized fostering an interdependent and intense academic space, promoting academic research initiatives, celebrating their rich history and impact, and adopting strategic marketing approaches. In contrast, private universities presented themselves as prestigious institutions that are student-centered, track the achievements of their students and alumni, provide international opportunities, and offer a relaxed yet vibrant academic atmosphere.

The findings demonstrate that both universities leverage technology and digital tools to enhance their competitiveness. Additionally, the differences and similarities observed reflect the convergence and divergence in the missions and visions of the two categories of universities. Overall, hypermodal and multimodal resources are used to construct identities, which serve as strategies for corporate branding and marketization (Tetteh & Afful, 2020) in both the global and national educational economies. These findings have implications for theorizing the public-private nexus in higher education, specifically in Ghana and globally.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are offered for future studies. First, since this analysis focused solely on the representational metafunction, future studies could consider interactional and compositional metafunctions on the homepages of public and private universities in Ghana. Furthermore, since homepages represent only one aspect of college and university marketing, future research should examine a broader range of academic marketing materials across different mediums (e.g., websites, viewbooks, and billboards). By analyzing the discourse across these various platforms, researchers could gain a deeper understanding of the nature of discourse in the broader context of academic marketing campaigns

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