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EXAMINING THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS SCHOOL UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS BROCHURES

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Abstract

Influenced by promotional culture, the commercialization of higher education has become a prevailing trend. To delve into how promotional culture affects university discourse practices, this study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis theory. It analyzes texts, discursive practices, and social practices in the undergraduate admissions prospectuses of various business schools in Egypt. The findings reveal that these institutions use first-person and second-person pronouns to create a sense of closeness with readers. Additionally, they frequently use evaluative adjectives and superlative forms to highlight the quality of their education, making their services more appealing. Private schools, in particular, emphasize their beautiful campus environments to boost competitiveness. Syntactically, these prospectuses resemble advertising discourse, using short sentences, phrases, pictures, and colors to leave a strong impression quickly. Socially, these schools promote their international education to align with market demands.

Keywords: Commercialization, Promotional Culture, Higher Education, Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

In today's world, we are constantly surrounded by information, particularly in a commercial society flooded with advertising content and "promotional culture" (Frank & Wernick, 1993). Frank and Wernick (1993) enlightened "Promotional culture is the 'semiotic colonization' of culture by commercial advertising". This phenomenon extends to self-advertising in various aspects of life, highlighting the significance of branding, image-building, and reputation management to attract and retain customers. Influenced by promotional culture, commercialization has also permeated higher education, where marketing strategies are employed to attract prospective students. Admissions prospectuses serve as a tool for schools to engage in self-promotion within this promotional culture. Consequently, this paper examines the undergraduate admissions prospectuses of business schools at Ain Shams University (ASU), Cairo University (CU), Al Obour High Institutes (AHI), and Future Higher Institute of Specialized Technical Studies (HISTS). Utilizing Fairclough's three-dimensional framework theory, this paper investigates the impact of promotional culture on the discourse practices within selected schools.

2. Literature Review

Due to the increasing influence of market forces on higher education, the commercialization of academic discourse is defined as market forces that increasingly impact higher education, as defined by Fairclough (1993), and has become more prevalent. In recent years, numerous researchers have employed multimodal discourse analysis to examine the commercialization of higher education across various countries and regions. Zhang and O'Halloran (2013) examined the commercialization of the National Universities admission website over 14 years; Shahnaz and Qadir (2022) analyzed the school badges marketing role; Zhang (2017) examined the marketing strategy of the "About Us" sections on the homepages of selected universities

These studies mainly focused on the visual elements of commercialization, images and color schemes, and were centered on public institutions. Building on such researches, the current study aims to broaden the investigation by analyzing the lexical and syntactic features of commercialization discourse in higher education. Furthermore, this research intends to compare and contrast the discourse practices of public and private universities in Egypt

influenced by promotional culture. This study aims to help fill existing gaps in the literature and lay the groundwork for further research on the commercialization of higher education.

3. Methodology and Data

Fairclough (1993) introduced the three-dimensional framework theory as a method for critical discourse analysis. According to Fairclough (1993) “Each discourse has three dimensions or facts: it is a spoken or written language text, it is an instance of discursive practice involving the production and interpretation of the text, and it is a piece of social practice”. This study examines the text, discursive practices, and social practices within the prospectuses. For the analysis of discursive practices, it employs the theory of intertextuality to highlight the generic intertextuality between the prospectuses and advertising discourse.

Ain Shams University (ASU), Cairo University (CU) are chosen as research samples because these two colleges are of the top-tier schools in Egypt and can represent the highest level of education. Al Obour High Institutes (AHI), Future Higher Institute of Specialized Technical Studies (HISTS) are chosen because they are two private institutions in Egypt, which are generally more profit-oriented. This paper examines both public and private colleges in Egypt, enhancing the representativeness of the research findings.

4. Analysis of Text

The text analysis involves examining form and meaning, including vocabulary, grammar, and sentence relations (Fairclough, 1993). This research specifically focuses on the use of personal pronouns and adjectives. Fairclough (1992) noted that conversationalization is a significant trend in discursive changes driven by the commodification of social practice. He explained that “conversationalization means the simulation of private, face-to-face, person-to-person discourse in public mass media” (Fairclough, 1992). In prospectuses, the use of personal pronouns can indicate the level of conversationalization. Therefore, this research calculates the frequency of “we,” “you,” “the program/the school,” and “students/candidates” in the prospectuses to determine if colleges use first-person and second-person pronouns to convey closeness. Additionally, the study identifies adjectives that appear more than three times in the prospectuses.

4.1. Analysis of Personal Pronouns

The university programs and students are the primary focus in the prospectuses. As illustrated in Table 1, all schools tend to use the first-person pronoun “we” to represent “the program” or “the school,” a concept Fairclough (1992) termed “synthetic personalization.” This technique is common in advertising discourse, where “we” and “you” are used to create a sense of closeness with potential consumers. In the prospectuses, terms like “the school” or “the program” are typically found at the beginning of the text or each paragraph, while “we” appears later. For instance, the CU Business School prospectus starts with “The CU Business School is committed to excellence in providing education to its undergraduate students, who represent over 20 nationalities.” Here, “Business school” is the subject, introducing the school to the reader. Later, the subject shifts to “we,” as in “We are achieving a global competitive position while emphasizing regional identity and leadership.” This shift helps bridge the gap between the students and the school. Similarly, in the ASU prospectus, “we” represents the faculty and program, as seen in “we offer lots of internship opportunities locally and internationally to help students acquire practical knowledge and related work experience.” This approach helps schools create a conversational, informal relationship with students and build a friendly image.

Table 1. The use of subjects, objects, and personal pronouns.

Words Colleges	We	The Program The School	You	Student(s)/ Candidate(s)
CU	10	3	8	4
ASU	15	6	8	5
AHI	12	8	6	6
HISTS	14	9	8	6

In a similar vein, the use of “you” in prospectuses enhances student engagement. For instance, ASU’s prospectus includes the phrase, “Let’s create a future that you look forward to today,” which can inspire readers and make them feel that the school will help them achieve their dreams. Similarly, AHI’s prospectus invites students to visit the school with the sentence, “see for yourself the excellent environment that you could join.” The use of “you” not only fosters a sense of equal dialogue between students and the school but also makes students feel valued as potential customers. This strategy helps colleges promote themselves, providing students with information about the schools and creating a sense of affinity.

Additionally, the study highlights the use of “I” to refer to potential applicants in the prospectuses of private schools. For example, the sentences “I did not study business subjects in secondary school, can I apply for the programs offered by the school of business?” (AHI) and “Can I choose more than one concentration?” (HISTS) pose questions in the tone of applicants and provide information by answering these questions. This approach makes applicants feel more involved while reading the prospectuses and shows that the schools are willing to address their queries.

4.2. Analysis of Adjectives

Beyond the use of personal pronouns, the study also identifies high-frequency adjectives in the prospectuses, noting their promotional characteristics. Zhang (2017) observed that the extensive use of descriptive words, such as evaluative adjectives and superlative forms, highlights a university’s background in history, education, and research. However, these expressions aim to persuade readers about the university’s quality rather than merely providing information, making them inherently more promotional.

Further than this commonality, each school also crafts a unique and competitive image through specific adjectives. For instance, CU’s use of “tailor-made” reflects its attention to student individuality and diverse teaching methods. ASU employs “meaningful” to emphasize its focus on the significance of teaching, not just outcomes, and “one of the most reputable” to showcase its vitality.

For private schools, the emphasis is on educational quality and career support. AHI’s prospectus states, “the quality of our programs is proven by the many awards won by our students in various competitions,” while HISTS mentions, “our program provides well-rounded business training to students.” These descriptions frame higher education as a service, with student achievements and career training serving as key attractions. Additionally, private schools highlight their campus environments as selling points, with HISTS describing an “excellent environment” to enhance market competitiveness.

Table 2. High-frequency adjectives.

Colleges	Adjectives
CU	The best, professional, tailor-made, pioneering, international
ASU	Most respected, the first, nimble, meaningful, international
AHI	One of the most reputable, professional, one of the most successful, well-rounded, global,
HISTS	High-achieving, Excellent, professional, high quality, one of the most popular, one of the most established, global

5. Analysis of Discursive Practice

The analysis of discursive practice examines the sociocognitive aspects of text production and interpretation (Fairclough, 1993). This section of the paper emphasizes the generic intertextuality of the prospectuses, which involves the integration and combination of various styles or genre features within a discourse (Xin, 2009).

There is a notable intertextuality between the style of prospectuses and advertisements. Typically, advertisements use short sentences paired with relevant images to convey key information quickly. Similarly, these prospectuses feature sections with informative headings, enabling readers to swiftly grasp essential details. For instance, in Figure 1, CU splits the sentence “Our vision is to achieving a global and competitive position” into two parts, allowing readers to easily find the content of interest through subheadings. In Figure 2, ASU uses phrases instead of full sentences to list the support provided by the business school, such as “successive developments to achieve leadership.” Figure 3 shows AHI’s prospectus section accompanied by relevant images, where text about internships is paired with a picture of a person in an office, reminding readers of potential internship opportunities.

These strategies create a generic intertextuality with advertising discourse, enabling readers to quickly obtain the information they seek. The combination of images and text also enhances the visibility of the school’s “career services.” In Figure 4, the imperative sentence “For further more information please click here” exemplifies Askehave’s (2007) observation that imperative clauses serve as “attention-seeking” advice in promotional and advertising discourse, attracting applicants to learn more about the college. Additionally, the study finds that most subheadings in these prospectuses are in the colors of the respective school emblems, further reinforcing the impression on potential applicants. By combining images, phrases, larger titles, and colors, the admissions prospectuses resemble advertisements promoting their programs to students.



Vision

"Achieving a global competitive position in the field of administrative and financial sciences, while emphasizing regional identity and leadership."

Mission

"Commitment to excellence in providing education, research, consulting and training services in the field of administrative and financial sciences in accordance with quality standards, through distinguished academic programmes, a stimulating environment for learning and intellectual creativity, optimal employment of knowledge technologies, and development of human capital while achieving effective local and global partnership, in an effort towards Community service and business environment."

Figure 1. Prospectus of CU



WELCOME TO FACULTY OF ENGINEERING

Vision
To be one of the best colleges in the world for its academic integrity and innovation in engineering education and scientific research through interdisciplinary and unique academic programs meet the needs of the community and contribute to sustainable development.

Mission
Prepare graduates capable of keeping pace with global technological in various disciplines that meet the needs of local and regional markets, and can conduct scientific research and spend through the creation of appropriate conditions for faculty members and their students and students, and to provide educational programs in advanced undergraduate and graduate studies and continuing education, and the establishment of advisory centers and research labs, including sophisticated contribute to community service and to meet its needs.



Figure 2. Prospectus of ASU

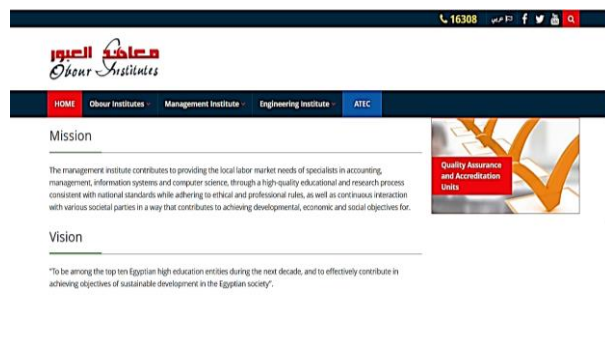


Figure 3. Prospectus of AHI



Figure 3. Prospectus of HISTS

6. Analysis of Social Practice

Social practices act as intermediaries between broad, abstract social structures and specific, concrete social events. Social fields, institutions, and organizations are formed as networks of these practices (Fairclough, 2013). This section of the paper examines the unique context provided by Egypt's social characteristics. In the prospectuses of the four schools, "international" and "global" are frequently used adjectives. For instance, the sentence "ASU Business School has led business education in Egypt since 1950, producing high-achieving graduates who influence the global business landscape" highlights the international impact of its graduates. The term "international best practice (AHI)" also indicates that the school's education aligns with global standards. According to Ayoubi and Massoud (2007), these sentences and phrases outline various areas of international collaboration, such as teaching programs, partnerships, and student and staff exchanges. In today's globalized market, internationalization is a strategic approach to enhancing market reputation (Mazzarol, 1998), as it allows students to gain professional knowledge and cross-cultural experience simultaneously (Brown, 1997). Due to its colonial history, Egypt is a contact zone where traditional Arabic and English cultures intersect and interact (Pratt, 1991). Today, Egypt is positioned as an international city with diverse cultures and extensive international exchanges. Consequently, Egyptian colleges can offer students educational opportunities that meet global

standards. The “international” and “global” education concepts and internship opportunities in the prospectuses are unique strengths of Egyptian universities, attracting applicants.

7. Conclusion

Promotional culture has significantly impacted various societal sectors, including higher education. As universities select students from a pool of applicants, students also choose their preferred institutions. To remain competitive, universities must market themselves to attract potential students. This paper examines how promotional culture influences the discourse practices in higher education by analyzing the undergraduate admissions prospectuses of business schools at CU, ASU, AHI, and HISTS. The prospectuses use personal pronouns like “we” and “you” to foster a closer connection between the schools and prospective students. Additionally, the syntactic features of these prospectuses exhibit a generic intertextuality with advertising discourse. The use of short sentences and phrases enables readers to quickly grasp essential information about the school. The combination of images, text, and colors further enhances the schools’ ability to advertise their programs effectively. Egypt’s unique historical background and geographical location position it as a leader in intercultural communication, making “international” and “global” education one of its key strengths. The analysis reveals that promotional culture is deeply embedded in the admissions prospectuses of various Egyptian universities, with college programs actively promoting themselves through these documents.

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