Website Representations of Saudi Universities in Makkah Region: A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract: Universities utilize language as a powerful tool to influence people’s perceptions. By employing language as a means of information and representation, electronic websites are becoming increasingly important for both universities and students. There are unanswered questions related to the portrayal of Saudi universities through the use of linguistic representation on their websites and the contribution of these websites to understanding the overlapping factors that reinforce academic practices within the Saudi social structure. This study compares and analyses the various discourses that are used to represent Saudi universities on their websites in terms of social constructs (e.g., gender and race). To that end, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is utilized to describe, analyse, and interpret the textual and visual representations of five Saudi university websites at the local, institutional and societal levels. The results indicate that the universities use a common systematic promotional discourse to represent themselves, emphasizing prestige and uniqueness. This finding means that universities are in control of the informational message with which their viewers interact. Moreover, terms such as “leaders”, “Vision 2030”, “distinguished education” and “competent” frequently appear without further explanations, thus triggering uncertainty. The findings also

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
University websites use language as a powerful tool to shape people’s perception. This study compares and analyzes the different levels of language used by Saudi universities to portray themselves on their websites in terms of social constructs (e.g., class, gender, race). To this end, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was incorporated to describe, analyze and interpret textual and visual representations of five Saudi university websites at the local, institutional and societal level. The results showed that universities use a promotional language to represent themselves, mainly emphasizing reputation and uniqueness. This indicates that universities are in control of the messages with which their viewers interact. The study encourages academic institutions to focus on the quality of information rather than quantity. They also need to use their mission statements to create realistic guidelines and objectives that are tailored to needs of the community.
suggest that the websites lack diversity in their representation of gender, race and economic status. The descriptive analysis reveals limited textual content providing viewers with cursory information about important topics such as registration, academic majors, campus and financial aid. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of underrepresented individuals is highly asserted by embracing and promoting diversity. This study recommends that these institutions should focus on the quality level of information and areas of strength rather than quantity. Furthermore, they need to employ their mission statements to generate realistic directions and purposes that are tailored to society’s needs.

Subjects: Middle East Linguistics; Middle East Society; Middle East Language; Adult Education; Education Studies; Higher Education; Study of Higher Education; Equality & Human Rights; Gender & Sexuality; Language & Linguistics

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis; higher education; Saudi University; website representation

1. Introduction and background

Universities use language, whether textual or visual, to create their distinctive identity and to attract future students, alumni and donors (Urciuoli, 2003, 2009). The Internet is an important medium for sharing language and its components, such as attitudes, aspirations, ideals and values, through official university websites. Hence, the discourse (i.e., texts, images) on such websites forms an influential platform of representation that is communicated to the viewer to assert certain institutional characteristics (Sherwin, 2016). Therefore, examining different modes of language-in-use and how they are deployed and operationalized on official university websites is crucial for understanding how these institutions represent themselves (Fairclough, 2013; Morizumi, 2017; Tanto, 2016). However, limited research has been dedicated to exploring the discourse that is used on university websites, despite their importance in admission and recruitment (Saichaie, 2011). Accordingly, Arab universities strive to assert their distinctive reputation to be perceived and acknowledged nationally and internationally; hence, there is a tremendous need to explore how Saudi universities, in particular, incorporate the language used to represent themselves on their websites. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the texts and visuals on official university websites to understand how Saudi universities utilize language to communicate their messages to the public.

Discourse emerges from the interaction of language within and between textual and visual representations (Fairclough, 1992a, 1992b; Gee, J. P., 2005). These representations can take the form of words, ideas, images, situations, meanings, objects, or symbols as major contributors to discourse models that are flexible and influenced by cultural, economic, historical, political, and social contexts. Therefore, language not only communicates information but also represents it. Such representation relies on who is using language and how language is deployed and operationalized (Wetherell, 2001).

Moreover, language is a social construct that affects and is affected by the power relations and social and cultural experiences of communities and individuals (Hall, 1997). These experiences help to shape the way individuals act, believe, interact and value (Fairclough, 2013; Gee, J. P., 2005). For instance, according to McDonough (1994), the commodification of higher education has led to a change in the social construct of prospective students from the free and independent exploration of choices to a highly normative system of enrolment techniques and academic marketing strategies. Accordingly, universities treat prospective students as “applicants/customers” who are recruited for potential gain (McDonough, 1994). In this manner, language, which is used to represent universities, is both constitutive (creating, codifying and conveying a message) and
constructive (shaping the meanings of a message and the ways in which it is understood) (Fairclough, 1995). Related to this idea is the notion of a “strategically deployed shifter” (SDS), whereby an institution uses powerful lexical items that are vague to tempt people to attach their own meanings to them, thus appealing to a wider range of audiences (Frankovitch, 2019). For instance, Taylor and Morphew (2010) found that to attract the greatest number of potential students/customers, approximately 78% of university mission statements employed some types of SDSs rather than providing distinct and useful information.

Language is not only written or spoken; it can also be a visual mode of communication, particularly images (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). In some instances, images can convey messages much more effectively than words. They can carry both the denotative and connotative meanings of a situation or an event, especially in an era in which people are becoming increasingly visual cultural consumers (Fairclough, 2001; Hall, 1997). However, a message can be far more effective if a combination of visual and textual modes of language is used (Fairclough, 1992b, 1995, 2001). In the context of university websites, stock imagery connects users to easy and anodyne ideas, while authentic textual passages connect them to genuine and trustworthy ideas (Sherwin, 2016). Apparently, universities have become aware of this issue and have begun incorporating visual and textual forms of language as a core component of communication on their websites and in their academic marketing materials (Anctil, 2008; Askehave, 2007).

2. Problem statement
Websites are universities’ windows to the world and vice versa. They are becoming increasingly effective in communicating huge amounts of information to a vast number of target audiences (Anctil, 2008; Ashburn, 2007; Boyles, 2007). Universities spare no effort to create an image of themselves that projects their unique identity and influences the decisions of their actual and prospective audience. As Anctil (2008) interestingly puts it, “Image is not everything for colleges and universities, but it is close. The image people have of an institution influences so many of the decisions they will make and the actions they will take as a result of that image” (p. 33). An official university website is one of the tools that can accomplish this task by providing a blend of different types of discourse that is capable of maintaining the university’s identity and sending the intended message(s). Additionally, this tool can be helpful in a highly competitive environment where every university is trying to increase its share of customers and resources and achieve the institutional legitimacy and political authority that lead to social and economic balance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Saichaie, 2011).

Universities worldwide seek to showcase their strong points in general and those of individual departments and colleges in particular. To that end, universities utilize language on their official websites to enhance their image and reputation. This effort has seemed to be effective, as research shows that 60% to 70% of prospective students access university websites, 84% of whom use them as a one-stop shop to learn about colleges and departments, proving that these websites are playing a major role in students’ decision-making process (Poock & Lefond, 2001; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014; Schneider & Bruton, 2004). Prospective students usually visit university websites and take an online tour of the campus and its various facilities. Indeed, as Anderson and Reid (1999) pointed out, “visiting university websites seems to have become a norm—with many people considering their visit to a university website as their first visit to the university itself” (p. 54).

The growing influence of websites has led universities to dedicate a large amount of resources to web design and maintenance (Sherwin, 2016). It is estimated that universities spend between 100,000 USD and $ two million on web design and 50,000 USD to 1 USD million on annual maintenance (Schneider & Bruton, 2004). This process involves various individuals and departments within the university and beyond. Several external consulting and advertising organizations are recruited to implement marketing strategies and tactics to increase the exposure and influence of university websites and to heighten their image and community presence (Bok, 2003;
Fairclough, 1993). However, these websites are often criticized for prioritizing “academic marketing” (Litten, 1980, p. 42), which involves irrelevant content over useful information that students need for their decision-making process (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Hossler, 1999). Therefore, given the important role that university websites play in influencing individuals’ actions and attitudes and in developing and maintaining image of universities, it seems appropriate to examine the portrayal of Saudi universities through the use of language on their official websites.

Websites are an essential source of information in education, social life, employment, government, commerce, e-shopping, healthcare, etc. According to Alexander et al. (2017, p. 351), “websites are developed and maintained by different cultures; webpage design may be influenced by the originating culture”. This importance of culture implies the significance of analysing websites’ layout, navigation, links, multimedia, visual representation, colour, and text. Interestingly, Saudi websites constitute a medium of dissemination and interaction. They are considered a social representation of the institutions’ mission and objectives of striving to achieve accessibility.

The dramatic increase in the number of government websites in Saudi Arabia over the last two decades has resulted in an increase in the number of university websites with no reference to the evaluation of accessibility or the messages represented by language. A lack of studies on this issue may prevent some users from benefiting from the content of these websites and limit their understanding of the role of the presented language and social interaction (Alayed, 2018). Studies on Saudi university websites have utilized their fulfilment of user requirements, regardless of time or location constraints, as a global aim (Al-Khalifa et al., 2017). The Saudi government is continuously introducing many new e-services for citizens and residents through their websites, but many people are still unable to take full advantage of these services due to poor accessibility and linguistic realization (Akram & Sulaiman, 2019).

In addition, most of the literature concerned with the Saudi context has focused on government websites to determine their accessibility and context engagement (Akram & Sulaiman, 2019; Alayed et al., 2016; Alharbi et al., 2016). Most of these studies have conducted a systematic literature review determining the web accessibility issues in Saudi university and government websites for disabled people (Akram & Sulaiman, 2017). In this regard, Gull and Iqbal (2017) argued that government websites are easy sources for gaining access to the services offered by governmental organizations. However, users cannot obtain the full benefits of these services if the e-government websites are not interactive and user friendly.

Saudi Arabia is already a popular study destination for international students. It is the home to many of the leading universities in the Arab region and has much to offer those from further afield. Saudi Arabia offers a variety of world-class universities, including one of the fastest-growing higher education systems in the Middle East. In the 2021 Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) “World University Rankings”, seven Saudi universities are ranked. Saudi Arabia was also featured in the first edition of the QS rankings, in which the country’s higher education system was ranked as the 36th best system in the world. Therefore, in Saudi Arabia, university websites should be regularly evaluated using proven criteria such as usability, accessibility and reputation as well as language discourse functions. Such evaluations will help universities enhance their websites to satisfy the needs of users, including academics and stakeholders (Al-Omar, 2017).

3. Purpose of the study
Considering the importance described above, it is crucial to examine the complexity of linguistic interactions, which implies discourse models. This analysis will contribute to further understanding the overlapping factors that enhance academic practices within the Saudi social structure that bounds the process. This study also asserts the similarities and dissimilarities that coexist in the
language used to represent Saudi universities. Social constructs (e.g., gender and race) are further highlighted in this analysis in terms of language use.

As a less researched area, little is known about the nature of discourse on tertiary education websites. This study aspires to serve as a guide for ascertaining the local, institutional, and societal levels. What types of discourse appear on Saudi university websites and to what extent are still unexplored. To date, research examining the discourse of university websites that incorporates the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) has remained limited. In this regard, this study will be the first conducted in the context of Saudi Arabia. Many previous Saudi studies focused on analysing university websites based on student perceptions (Saichaie, 2018) or in the context of library dean-ship websites (2011). This study is expected to broaden the scope of interest regarding university website representation. It will provide insight into higher education in Saudi Arabia, which is one of the largest providers of higher education services in the Arabian Gulf and Middle East. The impact of the study’s analysis will also be reflected in the connection with institutional identities and relationships with potential students. This study aims to investigate how Saudi universities incorporate language to represent themselves on their official websites as they seek to enhance their reputation by creating and maintaining a distinctive public image. Therefore, it seeks to answer the following main question:

-How do Saudi universities employ language (textually and visually) to represent themselves on their official websites?

This question can be sub-divided into the following two questions:

1. How similar is the language used to represent Saudi universities on their official websites?
2. How is language used to represent social constructs (e.g., gender and race) on Saudi universities' official websites?

4. Significance of the study
Those who attend colleges and universities seem to be more successful personally and professionally than those who choose to enter the workforce or military service directly after completing their secondary education (Nora, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Consequently, an increasing number of individuals who seek higher education are faced with promotional and informational messages on university websites that may inhibit or facilitate their university choice processes (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015; Saichaie, 2011). Therefore, as the prominence of online access to universities grows, so does the significance of investigating the language used by universities to represent themselves to stakeholders and prospective students (Adelman, 2006; Antcil, 2008; Saichaie, 2010). However, research on the textual and visual discourse of this topic is extremely scarce (Askehave, 2007; Saichaie, 2010; Urciuoli, 2009).

Most research based on the criteria of university choice is mainly focused on different factors related to socioeconomics, race, access to counsellors, university characteristics, athletics and university scholarships and funding (Del Vecchio, 2017; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Nora, 2004; Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015; Perna & Titus, 2005), with little attention paid to examining the online discourse underlying these issues on universities’ websites (Saichaie, 2010). Such research is especially important, as the digital divide between haves and have-nots is shrinking and global access to the Internet is ever-increasing (Saichaie, 2011; Venegas, 2006). Hence, this study attempts to fill a gap in the body of knowledge concerning the textual and visual representations of Saudi university websites by incorporating CDA, an approach that has hardly ever been applied to a topic that has predominantly been researched quantitatively (Perna, 2006). The findings of qualitative tools such as CDA should inform those of quantitative approaches and obtain a fuller picture of the issue at hand.
5. Literature review

University choice process
In general, prospective students’ college choice process consists of three phases: predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In each phase, a great deal of information gathering and processing take place to critically assess ideas and make wise decisions (Hossler et al., 1999). Although a host of factors influence students’ university choice, the socioeconomic factor is the most decisive (Saichaie, 2011). The university choice process of students with high socioeconomic status seems to be more rationalized and professionally supported than that of students with low socioeconomic status, as they have access to far fewer resources, such as information and financial support (McDonough, 1994; Venegas, 2006). However, research on the factors affecting students’ university choice has largely neglected the influence of university websites (Howard, 2013). This indifference could in part be because official university websites were not fully developed until the early 1990s (Kittle & Ciba, 2001).

Admissions practices in higher education
As the number of universities increases, so does the competition between higher education institutions to attract prospective students. This challenge has encouraged universities to adopt a market-based approach to their admission and recruitment efforts that has become a common practice (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). Therefore, to keep up with the new realities of higher education in the 21st century, universities resort to various marketing techniques such as advertising, branding, enrolment management and target marketing (Boyles, 2007; Morizumi, 2017).

This wave of commodification of education is widely criticized for steering universities’ efforts towards serving the market and not the mission. However, some observers believe that this trend is unavoidable. For example, Askehave (2007) points out that “Whether 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” (p. 724). Indeed, for some institutions, creating and preserving a prestigious image through marketing efforts outweigh academic quality. This situation probably has to do with the view that all universities share similar roles and characteristics, as well as the fact that it is quite difficult to measure university products (Taylor & Morphew, 2010). Therefore, in targeting potential customers, universities use the art of persuasion by accentuating their ranking, amenities, social life and athletic programmes using traditional and modern marketing tools (Hartley & Morphew, 2008).

Traditional tools for representing universities
Two traditional tools used for representing universities, which are still relevant to this day, are viewbooks and mission statements (Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015). Viewbooks (brochures, magazines, etc.) showcase the university through textual and visual details. The limited research on viewbooks shows that the textual elements of viewbooks are similar across universities (Durgin, 1998). Regarding the visual element, viewbooks feature images of athletics, faculty interaction and student life (Hite & Yearwood, 2001). Moreover, Klassen (2000) found that top-ranking universities show images of students engaged in cultural and artistic activities, college and faculty profiles, and science labs, as well as students attending classes, studying inside, working in small groups with teachers. In contrast, lower-ranking universities use images of alumni profiles, outdoor scenery, students in fitness centres, students in recreational activities, fairs, events, or parades, students working for university media and the student union and students studying outside. According to Klassen, top-ranking universities use their faculty to substantiate and enhance their image, while lower-ranking universities use students instead.

In addition, Hartley and Morphew (2008) examined the textual and visual elements of university viewbooks and identified six related themes: academics, admissions and finances, co-curricular events, campus features, the purpose of higher education and the significance of education. They
concluded that viewbooks project a rather idyllic and romanticized vision of university life, one that emphasizes the promise of personal gain or the “private good” over “the public good”.

The mission statement, on the other hand, is another tool that universities use to represent themselves. A mission statement is created by institutions to either instruct or promote a shared sense of purpose (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). The instructional side of the mission statement encourages the organization’s members to work towards achieving its objectives and expectations, while the promotional side urges members to communicate the organization’s goals and values to others. The limited literature on mission statements indicates that universities use normative and political statements, communicating a message of understanding the needs of students and promising to fulfill them (i.e., private good). Additionally, the SDS concept, which Morrish and Sauntson (2019) refer to as “multi-functional and polysemic” (p. 35), is widely used in the creation of mission statements (Taylor & Morphew, 2010). This usage is evident in the use of lexical items such as “excellence”, “diversity” and “distinction”. Such words serve the purposes of satisfying normative expectations and, at the same time, allowing readers to attach their own meanings to the messages embedded in them. As Taylor and Morphew (2010) maintained, “colleges and universities are determined to camouflage their distinctiveness via the use of ambiguous, ubiquitous terms” (p. 501).

**University websites as a modern tool for representation**

The prevalence of the Internet has created two daunting challenges for universities: keeping up with prospective students’ “real-time” need for access to information from formal and informal sources and controlling/managing information from outside sources (Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015; Saichaie, 2011). To deal with these challenges, universities have started to apply consumer-oriented marketing techniques in higher education. According to Hoang & Rojas-Lizana (2015), “The new realities of the twenty-first century have forced universities to adopt techniques known from business practices (e.g., advertising, marketing) to remain competitive in the education marketplace” (pp. 15–16). However, although this tendency provides a wide range of information about universities, it can also lead to exaggerations and misinformation, all of which are part of the information equation. One important marketing technique in this digital world is the official university website, which involves a range of textual and visual means of spreading and sharing information (Anctil, 2008; Boyles, 2007). In addition to attracting prospective customers, a university website serves as a platform for a university to distinguish itself from other similar institutions (Frazier, 2003). The type of discourse used is typically promotional in nature and aims to establish a sense of identity and prestige.

Discursive practices associated with marketization are found extensively in higher education. Additionally, mission statements construct university brands by shifting management from academic values towards corporate values (Chernyavskaya, 2019; Chernyavskaya & Safronenkova, 2019; Mautner, 2005). This marketization signifies more than a change in rhetoric. It implies more fundamental changes in university strategy and practices. The way these changes are reflected on university websites is the central issue of this study.

As the role of the Internet continues to grow stronger, so do the efforts of universities to develop and maintain their own official websites. Currently, most universities, including Saudi universities, have their own websites that provide all kinds of services to current and prospective students. These institutions dedicate thousands to millions of dollars for website design, development and maintenance (Schneider & Bruton, 2004). However, it is very important to understand how audiences react to and interact with these websites. As promotional tools, these websites combine interactivity, creative flexibility and a dynamic design. They are important for universities. For many potential students who are interested in a university and who may not have the needed funds or flexible time for a campus visit, a website may be the first or only point of contact between them and the university (Wang, 2008). Saichaie and Morphew (2014) conducted an analysis of 12 college websites and observed 6 informational themes: academics, campus
aesthetics, fine arts, intercollegiate athletics, student life, and values. The areas of most interest to university website viewers are admissions, the programmes on offer, financial support and costs, overall reputation, and campuses (Hossler et al., 1999). The research by Ford (2011) demonstrated that functionality, readability and distinctiveness are students’ main priorities when examining a future college website, just ahead of other schools’ websites. When navigating websites, students specifically hope to obtain content that provides them with ideas of a “student life” that is different from their previous school life (Ford, 2011; Pippert et al., 2013; Saichaie and Morphew (2014). Some research asserts the need for the website to form two-way conversations between the university and site visitors. In this vein, examining 215 community college websites; Shadinger (2013) found that 89% provided six or more opportunities to directly interact with the educational institution through its website. Regarding social embeddedness, university websites reflect the changing nature of discursive practices, including the values and identities they communicate (Chernyavskaya, 2019, 2016; Zhang & O’Halloran, 2013). Poock and Lefond (2001) concluded that the content of the website (textual and visual) is the main purpose of visiting a university website. According to their study, most students are particularly concerned with information about admission criteria, the application process, campus appearance and clubs and activities. They also prefer user-friendly university websites that organize the content around the audience (students or prospective students) rather than the function. Moreover, terms such as “academic programmes”, “departments”, “colleges” and “schools” tend to confuse viewers, whereas the use of the term “majors” is preferred. Regarding visuals, viewers of university websites are highly interested in images of the major features of the campus, while graphics in isolation are unrelatable. Viewers seem to associate reputation and prestige with an orderly landscape and appealing architecture. This is, “if the college or university looks good, it must be good” (Anctil, 2008, p. 82).

In the context of Saudi higher education, there are 28 public universities and 34 private colleges and universities (Higher Education Statistics Report, 2018). Most, if not all, of these institutions have realized the significance of developing their own official websites. However, very few studies have been conducted to examine Saudi universities’ websites, and none of these studies, to the knowledge of the researcher, have used CDA as a tool to evaluate these websites. Among the available studies is that of وفاضلة (البليز، 2017) who mainly focuses on how well the information-seeking process via university websites reflects the image of universities from the viewpoint of students. She concluded that students typically use university websites to register for courses, check their grades and view their test timetables. She also indicated that students are moderately satisfied with university websites and that these websites must be constantly updated to remain relevant to students’ needs and aspirations. In a similar study, andğırız (2018) surveyed the perceptions of students from two universities regarding their websites in relation to design, available services, accessibility and user-friendliness. She confirmed that the examined university websites are not completely in line with international standards in terms of services and design and that the websites should offer more interactive content. وفاضلة (البليز، 2011), on the other hand, carried out a content analysis study to compare the library deanship websites of a few Saudi universities. He contends that Saudi university websites are not in line with international standards and that they need regular evaluation and enrichment to accommodate more digital content and student services. Alayed et al. (2016) asserted that guidelines are developed in Western countries and that applying them to Arabic websites can raise more accessibility issues, for example, related to culture and language to enhance the accessibility of Saudi university websites. Al-Omar (2017) analysed the internal and external usability characteristics of the websites of Saudi universities that offer distance education courses, indicating that the university websites were accurate and well-designed but violated basic guidelines on accessibility and usability.

In summary, although traditional tools of academic marketing and recruitment are still relevant to this day, technology in the form of websites is increasingly playing a pivotal role. Most research on official university websites discusses how they are used in college choice processes. However, extremely limited research has targeted the types of representational language (textual and
visual) used by universities on their websites. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to contribute to this line of research.

6. Methodology
In the current study, a qualitative research methodology was utilized to examine the language used by Saudi universities to represent themselves on their official websites. The qualitative approach provides an in-depth understanding of human actions and meanings by describing the inherent or essential attributes of social participants and their experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). CDA is considered a data collection method that attempts to explore the discourse that is the product of the interaction between text and image as representations of institutions (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017). Hence, this method was employed in the current study to examine in depth textual and visual representations at different levels: the local, institutional, and societal levels (Askehave, 2007; Saichaie, 2011). Moreover, since data collection through CDA is rarely linear (Mautner, 2005), different aspects of social practice, such as economics, history and politics, were considered.

As mentioned above, in this study, CDA involves textual and visual analysis. For the textual analysis of university websites, the researcher employed a linguistic analysis rubric developed by Janks (2005) based on Fairclough’s theoretical approach to CDA. This rubric provides a reliable tool for identifying text signifiers, linguistic choice, arrangement, layout, sequence and juxtaposition (Janks, 2005). For the visual analysis, a rubric developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) was applied. Although visual analysis is still in its infancy and varies widely (Flick, 2009), this rubric was found to be appropriate for this study, as it acknowledges CDA standards. The focus will be on the general attributes of visual elements (e.g., actors, actions, setting), the types of actors (e.g., Black, White, female), and design (e.g., layout, graphics, background, relationships).

The textual and visual analyses were conducted simultaneously, which is in line with previous similar CDA studies (e.g., Askehave, 2007; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015; Saichaie, 2011). The analysis procedures involved a paper and pencil as well as electronic analysis of websites. Screen captures and offline copies of websites were saved to assist in collecting and preserving data.

The time of data collection was January 2020. The rationale behind this choice stemmed from the fact that at this time of year, students actively seek out information about universities. Naturally, this is also the time when university admissions and recruitment offices are busy editing and updating the content on their websites, the data of which were accessible and publicly available.

Sample
The purposeful sampling process was appropriate for this study, as it provides rich data and in-depth analysis (Patton, 2002; Flick, 2009; Gee, J. P, 2005; Naderifar et al., 2017). Therefore, in the present study, the sample includes all the universities in the Makkah region of Saudi Arabia, which is where the researcher lives and works. (See Table 1 below).

| University                  | Website          | Foundation | City    |
|-----------------------------|------------------|------------|---------|
| 1. Umm Al-Qura University (UQU) | https://uqu.edu.sa | 1950       | Makkah  |
| 2. King Abdulaziz University (KAU) | https://www.kau.edu.sa | 1967       | Jeddah  |
| 3. Taif University (TU)      | https://www.tu.edu.sa | 2004       | Taif    |
| 4. King Abdullah University (KAUST) | https://kaust.edu.sa | 2009       | Jeddah  |
| 5. University of Jeddah (UJ)  | https://www.uj.edu.sa | 2014       | Jeddah  |
Sample content was available on five university websites. Data were collected from the following webpages in the sample:

1. The university’s “Home” page (e.g., www.universityx.edu.sa).

2. The “About” page that describes the university (i.e., location, year of foundation, academic reputation).

7. Textual findings

Home page

(Descriptive Analysis)

The “Home” page mainly focuses on the institution's successes, activities, prominent actors and access to additional content. To establish its identity, every institution uses its “Home” page to highlight its achievements while featuring distinguished faculty members, students and external recognition. For example, KAUST celebrates the achievement of two of its academic staff: “KAUST professors named Fellows of The Combustion Institute”. Similarly, TU announces its commendations, stating that “Pharmacy students gain advanced positions at DUPHAT 2020”. These texts generally appear near the top of the webpage as captions to large images as part of the primary content of the “Home” page. Another issue that seems to dominate the “Home” page of all these institutions, except for TU, is tackling the coronavirus outbreak. For instance, UQU announces in Arabic only that it is recruiting volunteers; additionally, through their “Home” page web banner and in Arabic only, KAUST and UJ plead everyone to stay home. Only KAUST addresses the pandemic in English (but not in Arabic) on its “Home” page, stating that “KAUST is responding to COVID-19”.

The listed “ads”, “news” and “activities” on the “Home” page of each institution again highlight the achievements of their students, academic staff, colleges and departments as evidence of their vitality and quality. For example, on the UQU page, the following appears: “UQU scholarship student is honored as the Best Employee at Indiana State University”. TU marks its precedence in supporting female sports by announcing that “TU hosts the first sports gathering for female students at Saudi universities”. KAU distinguishes itself by reporting the following news: “King Abdulaziz University Organizes First Saudi International Trauma Week”. UJ also promotes its image as an aspiring university, stating that “His excellency the president of the University of Jeddah meets with teaching staff and discusses the project of the modern Saudi University”. Apparently, the national, regional or international achievements of the universities’ staff, students and departments are used as means of constructing and promoting the universities' identity.

In addition, the “Home” page reveals representations of the nature of actors' engagement with various institutional activities. Three themes emerge: development and internationalism, community service and partnership, and celebration of the successes of academic staff and students. As a good example of the first theme, TU announces the following: “TU acting president launches the Professional Record platform”. Similarly, UQU states, “The president of Umm Al-Qura University discusses strengthening cooperation with the Gambian universities”. Regarding the theme of community service and partnership, KAUST’s “Home” page captures the image of its president: “KAUST president’s address on COVID-19”. Moreover, UJ posts that “University of Jeddah and the Jeddah’s General Department of Education sign a partnership agreement to provide online professional development and training programs for teachers”. KAUST exemplifies the third theme by celebrating the appointment of a highly regarded expert: “KAUST secures expertise from The Red Sea Development Company”. UJ hails its talented students, reporting that “Prince Misha’l Bin Majed honors 26 talented male and female students from the University of Jeddah”.


The text on the “Home” page provides hyperlink access to other webpages on the university website. The language is very concise and appears in a word (e.g., “Administration”, “Admissions”, “Academics”, “Centers”, “Faculties”), two words with or without the use of an ampersand (e.g., “Research & Innovation”; “School & Daycare”) or three words referring to different departments and units (e.g., “Research Chairs Program”, “Science and Technology Unit”). Furthermore, there are phrases that may serve as captions to images or, in many cases, hyperlinks to additional content on a particular topic (e.g., “Helping corals survive in the Red Sea”, “Pop stats for big geodata”). Writing in this style attracts the reader to explore the topic in more detail (Richardson, 2007).

In summary, the language on the “Home” pages of these universities reveals a publicizing discourse by repeatedly promoting the institutions’ achievements in general as well as the success of major actors who are engaged in the institutions’ activities (e.g., departments, colleges, students, professors). The distinction of these actors undoubtedly serves to enhance the university’s image and establishing its identity (Toma et al., 2005). Through highly relational language, the text exhibits the actors’ intellectual activities to engage viewers and entice them to read on and seek more information. The technique of creating an environment where students interact with meaningful academic activities is in line with research on the marketing of higher education and CDA (e.g., Fairclough, 1993; Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015).

The use of short descriptive phrases creates a sense of connection with the local community and beyond and raises viewers’ awareness of other topics on the website. Additionally, the repetition of certain successful actors and university accomplishments constitutes an attempt to establish the institution’s unique identity and to foreground its distinctive activities.

About page

(Descriptive Analysis)

The discourse on the “About” page is that of self-promotion. Universities use this webpage to showcase their histories and how such histories are related to their contribution to education in the country. In the case of the sample in this study, most of the universities provide brief chronological information about their foundation and major development phases. Moreover, all the universities use this webpage to introduce their vision, mission statements, values and goals.

The discourse on the “About” page underscores the university’s unparalleled capacity to provide the education and skills necessary for its students. For example, KAUST states that it provides “An environment where excellence in curiosity-driven and goal-oriented research thrives. Through our endowment, we provide flexible and sustained support to pursue long-term research and scientific goals. Our people are empowered and encouraged to aim high and investigate important questions with passion and freedom”.13 UJ also announces that its vision is to “prepare the leaders of the future”.14 and it then lists all of its unique attributes, such as being the first Saudi university to approve the “academic acceleration of the talented”.15 KAU shows its national and international aspirations by stating that its vision is to be a “World Class University with sustainability and community engagement”.16 TU’s mission emphasizes the Saudi Vision 2030 and that the university aims “To be an academic institution with a significant role in realizing the Saudi Vision 2030 and contributing to the development of individuals and community”.17 UQU’s “Home” page presents an overview of and the history of the university, asserting that it is “one of the most distinguished universities due to its location and noble origin”.18 Moreover, it announces its “superior status as an academic institution that has a great reputation with regard to Shari`ah sciences, education, and Islamic studies, as well as modern scientific and applied specializations”. The “Home” page of UQU states the mission and the vision of the university based on the previously presented overview. Both the strategic and executive plans, the geographical site and illustrative statistics are depicted with hyperlinks on the UQU “Home” page as detailed information.
Except for KAUST and UJ, none of the universities are keen to show viewers of the “About” page the attributes that make them special and attractive to students. This information is not readily available, as the viewer must click on further hyperlinks.

The theme of student-centredness is not popular on the “About” page. Almost all of the institutions portray themselves as the primary gatekeepers of students’ success, not their individual merits. For instance, TU expresses its ability to “develop local competent specialists to contribute to and transform knowledge into a drive for advancement.” Similarly, KAU wants to become a leader in

“Developing standards of assessment for student performance, high-quality research and development programs, cultural contributions, garnering the trust of society and the corporate world, and optimal investment of university resources and capabilities.”

Additionally, UQU aims to

“Provide distinguished education and research that serve the community as well as Hajj and Umrah and contribute to the development of a knowledge-based economy in accordance with the Saudi Vision 2030”.

Only KAUST seems to suggest an effort to cater to a student-centred learning experience by stating that it provides a “Collaborative learning environment and a distinctive educational experience”.

To summarize, on the “About” page, each university employs self-promotional language in an attempt to further uphold its individuality and uniqueness (Anctil, 2008; Askehave, 2007). History is used to show prominence and status and to attract more prospective students, even though little is mentioned about each university’s campus, students’ learning experience, athletic achievement or global and local relevance.

Furthermore, the discourse moves to each university’s vision, mission and goals. They mainly focus on public constructs, which might not necessarily be a truthful effort (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). Moreover, the terms “leaders”, “Vision 2030”, “distinguished education” and “competent” appear frequently without further explanations, raising suspicion about these claims.

8. Visual findings

HOME PAGE

8.1. General features

Visuals have a considerable influence on the “Home” page of the universities in the sample. These visuals comprise multiple, rotating primary images, banners and logos. The primary images communicate to viewers the impressive status of each institution by showcasing the interior and exterior of the university’s architecture (e.g., buildings) and lively campus scenery. Regarding the outdoor view, long shot images (see Figure 1) emphasize the uniqueness of the university, and they create their own special identity within an aesthetically conscious environment (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The indoor images accentuate vibrant classrooms and lab work in a series of close-up frames to generate intimacy (see Figure 2).

8.2. Types of individuals

Over 136 primary images appear on the institutions’ “Home” pages. Brown individuals are the primary subjects of the primary images on the “Home” pages in the sample (94%), whereas non-Brown individuals represent only 6% of the people in these images. Approximately 10% of the images feature female individuals.
For TU, 99% of the primary images feature a Brown individual. Female individuals are represented in 18% of the “Home” page images, but they are not the focus of any of those images. Almost all the men wear traditional Arabic clothes (98%), and the same percentage of women wear traditional Islamic garb. On the KAUST “Home” page, men and women appear almost equally in the primary images. Half of the male actors appear to be Brown, and the rest are 38% Asian and 12% White. Approximately 48% of the women are White, and 28% are Brown and Asian. None of the male individuals wear traditional Arabic clothes, and only 5% of the female individuals wear
Islamic garb. For KAU, no ethnicity other than Brown appears on the university’s “Home” page. Female individuals are represented in only 3% of the images. All men and women wear traditional Arabic clothes. Interestingly, almost none of the images on UQU’s “Home” page represent women, and all the male individuals are Brown and wear traditional Arabic clothes. The same holds true for UJ’s “Home” page.

8.3. Page design
Large, primary images appear in the upper half of the “Home” pages, and the institutions’ logos are displayed near them, typically in the upper right corner (see Figure 4 below). Each university has “News” and “Events” sections placed in the lower half of the webpage. The “News” section draws attention to student, staff, faculty, and university accomplishments, accompanied by small images.

The “Events” section emphasizes current activities on and off campus (e.g., athletic competitions, volunteering, workshops, deadlines, conferences). All institutions display rotating visuals that change every 3 to 6 seconds. Navigation menus display admissions-oriented topics (e.g., “University administration”, “Admissions”, “Deanships”, “Colleges”, “E-services”); however, no audience-oriented topics are shown (e.g., “Alumni”, “Current Students”) except for on KAUST’s webpage. All of the institutions use vertical navigation menus that contain multiple hyperlinks to other information sources on the website. In general, the pages use a light colour scheme, together with one of the university’s colours. This usage is indicative of the institutions’ efforts to create brand identity (Antcll, 2008; Chernyavskaya, 2019; Mautner, 2005). Additionally, all of the institutions feature a horizontal triptych, placing the primary content in the middle row.

ABOUT PAGE

8.4. General features
The “About” pages of the sample universities are highly textual. The very few images that appear show scenes of award ceremonies, campus scenery and student life. Three of the five sample universities (UQU, KAU and TU) do not feature visual elements in the primary content area (Figure 5). UJ utilizes an image of a ceremony showing talented students holding acceptance letters (Figure 6). KAUST’s “About” page is the most unique in the sample because of the number of images it uses and the number of themes portrayed in the images (Figure 7), including campus scenes, commencement, achievements, lab work, partnerships with major institutions and student life.

8.5. Types of individuals
Over 44 primary images appear on the UJ and KAUST “About” pages. Brown individuals are the primary subjects of the primary images on the “About” pages in the sample (37%), whereas non-Brown individuals represent only 63% of the people in the images in the “About” pages in the sample. Approximately 15% of the images feature female individuals. For UJ, 100% of the primary images feature a Brown individual with 0% representation of female individuals in the “About” page images. All the men wear traditional Arabic clothes (100%). On KAUST’s “About” page, images of men (82%) are more prevalent than images of women (18%). Moreover, 47% of the male individuals appear to be Brown and the rest are 8% Asian, 2% Black and 43% White. Approximately 63% of the women are White, 13% are Brown, and 24% are Asian. Almost 90% of the male individuals do not wear traditional Arabic clothes, and none of the female individuals wear Islamic garb.

8.6. Page design
For all of the sample universities, the design of the “About” page is highly consistent with that of the “Home” page except for being highly textual. The main page that presents the university’s history provides other links to the university’s administrative and academic staff, councils, photo galleries and contact information. In general, the pages use a light colour scheme, together with one of the
university’s colours, which is done to establish the institution’s brand identity. Additionally, all of the institutions feature a horizontal triptych, placing the primary content in the middle row.

9. Process analysis
This section further discusses the themes from the “Home” and “About” pages of the sample universities. In particular, the findings are analysed based on Fairclough’s interpretive framework, which focuses on four dimensions: (1) the content of language, (2) subjects, (3) the relationships of the subjects and (4) the connections between the role of language and the social structures that it represents and supports.

9.1. Content of language
Certain actions and themes comprise the content of language to communicate the intention behind a message. Two very important tools for accomplishing this communicative task are verbs and modality (Halliday, 1985; Fairclough, 2001). Verbs describe what the producer wants to communicate to viewers, as they convey material/action, mental, behavioural, verbal, existential and relational meanings (Halliday, 1985).

9.1.1. Verbs
The data gathered in this study reveal the predominant use of material/action verbs (e.g., gain, respond, host, organize, meet, launch, address, sign, provide, secure, thrive, strive, pursue,
empower, investigate, prepare, contribute, develop, transform, collaborate). Most of these action verbs relate to the institution as a major player and a powerful actor, whereas very few of these verbs relate to students as actors. As a result, this promotional discourse reinforces the uniqueness, originality and reputation of these institutions. For example, KAUST states that it “provides a unique environment for researchers to conduct high-impact research. Learn about our Research Centers.”

This type of representation projects to students the institution’s academic distinctiveness as a beacon of knowledge and empowerment.
9.1.2. Polarity and Modality
Polarity produces an utterance that is either positive or negative. Modality, however, is the intermediate position we take between positive and negative polarity in the utterances we exchange (Halliday, 1985; Liping, 2017). Modalization refers to when a message expresses probability or frequency. Modulation is when a message expresses obligation, willingness or ability (Ibid).

There is a high degree of positive polarity in the discourse of the sample university webpages. For example, KAUST states that “KAUST provides its community members with both rewarding career opportunities and a wide range of community services to make life on campus enjoyable”. Similarly, KAU boasts that is “considered a pioneer in offering higher education”. Furthermore, UJ directs the attention of viewers to the fact that it is “the first public university to allow students to register for courses of the preparatory year during the final year in the secondary stage”.

Most of the modality found in the discourse of the sample university websites comes in the form of modulation. UQU expresses its sense of willingness to reach “local and regional excellence in education, scientific research, community service and entrepreneurship”. Similarly, KAUST explains that it “strives to build a strong culture of entrepreneurship and to create new knowledge-based businesses in the Kingdom”. Additionally, the same university uses a high degree of obligation, announcing that “KAUST shall be a beacon for peace, hope and reconciliation, and shall serve the people of the Kingdom”.

Figure 7. The KAUST “About” page.
and the world”. Apparently, only universities have the power to provide opportunities and the vision to plan and execute the future, thus controlling students’ modes of behaviour.

9.1.3. Purpose
The content on the websites of the sample institutions serves as an exhibition of their activities and accomplishments, and it creates the uniqueness and status to which they all aspire. The main objective behind the visual and textual discourse is to acquaint viewers with the university and to appeal to their desires by presenting activities that illustrate the campus life of various actors. In general, these activities showcase the institution’s reputation. For instance, the textual discourse on the “Home” page praises the success of a faculty member, student or department, while it is overshadowed by the accompanying attractive image. Hence, text and image complement each other, with the image highlighting the general perspective and the text providing the details.

Compared to any other webpages, the “About” pages of the sample universities are highly textual. Their main purpose is to underscore the reputation of the institution by presenting its history and the contributions it has made over the years. It also features the institution’s vision, mission and aspirations. For example, KAUST declares, “We have many milestones in our history that we are extremely proud of”, and it then goes on to list those achievements over the years. Other universities, such as UJ, use the “About” page to list some reasons as an answer to the question “Why is the University of Jeddah unique?”. The analysis of the “About” page discourse suggests that universities portray themselves as the primary facilitators of and contributors to success. Such a representation emphasizes the power and control of these institutions over viewers (Fairclough, 2001).

9.2. Subjects
As Fairclough (2001) points out, the types of individuals involved in textual and visual messages help clarify their underlying goal. The individuals on the sample websites are displayed as lively and active, both visually and textually. The active voice (e.g., “sets up”, “discuss”, “starts”, “launches”) is usually combined with images that show students and/or faculty members doing something important or interesting (e.g., a meeting, fieldwork, lab work, sports). The students, who dominate most of the images, appear to be healthy and relaxed. There is little if any presence of individuals who are female, overweight, or of a different racial background or who have special needs.

The subjects, who appear as individuals or in groups, are portrayed in close-ups, thus creating the illusion of face-to-face interaction and a para-social relationship with viewers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The aerial long shots of buildings (see Figure 1) establish power and convey a sense of identity and distinctiveness. For example, on the TU and UQU websites, many of the images directly or indirectly feature decorated gates and landmarks.

Regarding gender and race, diversity is an issue, as the numbers disproportionality favour of local Brown male actors (students and faculty members) over females or people of other racial backgrounds. In regard to clothing, most actors wear traditional Middle Eastern garments. Textually, diversity is a notion that is usually linked to geography. For instance, KAUST celebrates diversity by stating that “Living in a community of 7,000 residents from more than 100 countries is simply amazing!”. It appears that the sample institutions perform poorly with regard to embracing and promoting diversity in its full sense (race, culture, religion, gender). In fact, some of them avoid addressing this topic altogether, thus either being influenced by or reinforcing social norms (Fairclough, 2001).

9.3 Relationships
This section discusses aspects of visual relationships such as image act, angle, distance, placement, sequencing and size. Additionally, it presents some textual representations of these relationships.
9.3.1. Image act

The image act basically pertains to how the producer of the image requires the viewer to behave, feel or think. Many of the images in the sample appear to be natural, as though they were part of everyday university life (e.g., Figure 4 and Figure 7). These images, which are not directed to the viewer, seem to offer information and to encourage the viewer to contemplate (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Interestingly, the images that are directed to the viewer, which demand action/attention from him/her, are less frequent. Figure 3 and Figure 6, shown above, are good examples of this type of image, as they seem to compel viewers to consider the friendly and welcoming facial expressions. Moreover, the accompanying text supports the images; for example, in Figure 3, viewers are explicitly encouraged to apply to the university. If website visitors acknowledge the depicted images, they will be compelled to consider the expressions of the image subjects. On the other hand, textual expressions such as “Welcome to KAU” might be more cohesive and collaborate with the image subjects to attract viewers’ attention.

9.3.2. Angle

Images can be shown from high, low or eye-level angles, all of which reveal certain types of relationships between depicted individuals and viewers (Wang et al., 2014). Low-angle images of individuals (pointing up) seem to encourage viewers to respect and revere the depicted individuals. On the other hand, high-angle images (pointing down) assign power to viewers over the depicted individuals. Eye-level angles maintain equal relationships between the viewer and the depicted individual (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Wang et al., 2014). Most of the images from the sample websites feature an eye-level angle, thus promoting equality between individuals and viewers (see Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4). High-angle images are the second most frequently used angle in the sample, transferring control over the situation to viewers.

9.3.3 Distance

Very few images in the sample feature close-range images. These types of images, which show people or objects at a close personal distance, communicate to viewers a sense of togetherness and intimacy (see Figure 2 and Figure 8). In some instances, the producer of the image uses extreme close-ups to represent an even more welcoming and inviting environment. Additionally, long-range images, which show an individual or an object from a far distance, are less frequent in the sample (see Figure 1). This composition emphasizes unfamiliarity and detachment but may serve the purpose of signifying uniqueness and character.
Medium-range images (e.g., Figure 3 and Figure 6) are found more frequently in the sample. These compositions promote social distance and may invite the viewer to contemplate the individuals and their academic experiences and achievements.

9.3.4. Placement and sequence
According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the placement and sequence of the text and visuals on websites determine how the producer wants viewers to internalize and personalize the information. As explained above, all of the institutions in the sample present a vertical triptych, creating three zones: the ideal, mediator, and real zones. In the ideal zone, the contents (usually banner images and logos) are presented as essential and exemplary. The bottom of the webpage holds more specific and practical information. The mediator zone connects the top and bottom zones and represents the core of contents on websites. Figure 9 is a good example that showcases this framework.

9.3.5. Size
The producer’s intentions can be revealed through the size of a displayed image. The larger it is, the higher the value and the presumed effect on the viewer (Lynch & Horton, 2008). Moreover, text has become secondary to image, as societies tend to be more visual than ever (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Large primary images play a significant role in attracting prospective students and recruits. However, none of the sample universities make use of such images, except for KAUST and, to a lesser degree, TU.
8.9.6. Relationships of textual representations

Using personal pronouns such as "you" and "we" significantly contributes to understanding the relationships of representations, as they communicate intimacy, benefit and support to viewers (Askehave, 2007). Interestingly, the use of these two personal pronouns is extremely rare in the sample. Only KAUST is able to provide few examples of the use of the personal pronoun "we": “we provide flexible and sustained support to pursue long-term research and scientific goals” and “We are stronger together.”

Furthermore, with the exception of KAUST, none of the universities make use of the personal pronoun “you” (or any imperative or request) in text on their websites. KAUST encourages the viewer by speaking directly to him/her to “Apply to KAUST” and “learn about our research centers.” The limited use of personal pronouns in the sample may suggest that these institutions want to project a sense of impartiality and rigidity.

The third person appears to be more prevalent on the sample websites. This technique is used to establish identity and to cement the reputation of the institution in the minds of viewers. For example, the UJ website states that the “president of the University of Jeddah meets with teaching staff and discusses the project of the modern Saudi University.”

9.3.7. Connections

Connections emphasize the role played by discourse (Fairclough, 2001). The discourse on the sample websites is mostly functional/informational, suggesting that universities retain control over viewers. Except for KAUST, the sample institutions do not embrace promotional discourse or student-centredness on their websites. This stance does not respond to the academic marketing trend, which dates back to the early 1980s, when universities around the globe began to adopt business-like techniques to compete with other institutions to attract students and maintain academic prestige and status (Bok, 2003). This is evident in the rarity of personal pronouns, relational discourse and third-party endorsements (e.g., university rankings). This could be partly explained by the fact that these universities are government-run institutions that do not have full independence to diversify their activities. Nevertheless, these institutions retain relative freedom to manage their budgets, and they have recently been required to create partnerships with the private sector and to seek different venues for funding (paid academic programmes, consultations, etc.).

10. Societal analysis

Societal analysis, which is the third dimension in Fairclough’s CDA framework, attempts to establish connections between social practices and the discourse under scrutiny. This level of analysis tries to uncover how the identities of societal actors (institutions and prospective students) are shaped by discourse.

10.1. Institutional identity

Websites play a key role in college and university marketing and promotion procedures, offering important information and allowing potential students to imagine themselves on campus. Recently, the image of universities and their common identity have been created and retained as a process of branding and reforming this image externally rather than by maintaining departmental inner practices, mentor-disciple relationships and so on. The public image has become an important tool for maintaining social acceptance and consensus with regard to the university’s position and the credibility of its mission and ambitions. This is closely connected to a range of strategic objectives being accomplished, including exposure to different forms of resources, active involvement in resource allocation, and explanation and legitimation of the university’s goals.

Universities strive to construct their global identities to stay relevant and competitive in a global world (Chernyavskaya & Safronenkova, 2019; Smith, 2015; Stensaker, 2015). In the discourse in the sample, higher education is represented as a “product”, although the institutions do not offer enough details as to how they distinguish themselves from other competitors in that regard. Moreover, the discourse of the sample universities as the primary outlet of knowledge, education and civic engagement is still persistent. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable shift towards creating
a commercial and privatized identity (Boyles, 2007). Furthermore, the primary focus of visual and textual representation is on campus scenery and high-ranking university officials. The colour scheme of the sample webpages follows the official colours of each university to cement its identity in the minds of viewers. This practice is what Anctil (2008) meant when he warned against impressionistic statements: “If the college or university looks good, it must be good” (p. 82).

In addition, the discourse on the experience of going to the university is probably unrealistic, as the emphasis seems to be more on support facilities, leisure activities, news and images of university landmarks instead of regarding the university as a place for learning, critique and thoughtful discussions. Hence, little effort has been made to combine information with persuasion.

10.2. Prospective student identity
Every university carefully selects actors who represent the types of students who are part of the university’s academic life. Although infrequently, the discourse in the sample revolves around the ideal student who is ready to respond professionally to the challenges of the future. Moreover, although slightly and implicitly, the university samples encourage diversity and equal opportunities; however, the discourse on the sample websites does not attest to this stance. Students are often represented as Brown, affluent, traditionally clothed and male. They usually appear to have close social contact with one another and are portrayed in images that entice the viewer to create an imaginary relationship with them. Hence, the constant portrayal of one slice of society may isolate and demoralize those who wish to become part of those institutions simply because they do not fit the standards of that social model (Chernyavskaya, 2019; Fairclough, 2001; Sperber & Origgi, 2012; Zhang & O’Halloran, 2013). Accordingly, gender, race, ethnicity and social status are poorly addressed topics in the sample. Additionally, as educational institutions, these universities employ a variety of tactics to produce their promotional message. However, this message is bounded by societal constructs and the universities’ goals and aims; therefore, there are some differences in the visual and textual representation related to societal norms.

Additionally, the website samples are dominated by visuals, the main purpose of which is to immerse prospective students in university life. In general, the displayed images are of co-curricular and extracurricular activities that do not truly represent the experience of going to the university in its entirety. Moreover, the discourse analysis reveals that to retain control, the universities do not try to endow students with any responsibilities, a finding that is well supported by the literature (Askehave, 2007; Fairclough, 2001; Ford, 2011; Pippert et al., 2013; Saichaie, 2010; Saichaie & Morpewh, 2014).

Bounded by societal norms, the textual and visual representation on the university websites depicts different social constructs, such as gender, race, and diversity. Del Vecchio (2017) argued that the depiction of diversity on university websites can be used as a marketing tool for universities. In this context, university websites will act as producers of products that comply with societal norms. Therefore, except for KAUST, in the sample of Saudi university websites, the imagery of the individuals on the “Home” and “About” pages showcase underrepresented social constructs in terms of gender and diversity. According to the researcher, as product producers, these websites need to produce a friendly societal product by avoiding tense topics. The imagery depicted is a reflection of societal norms and conservative conventions.

11. Discussion
The present study attempts to explore how Saudi universities use language, textually and visually, to represent themselves on their official websites. In this section, the similarities/dissimilarities that exist in the language used to represent Saudi universities on their official websites are discussed. Next, the issue of the representation of social constructs (e.g., gender and race) on these websites is addressed. Finally, the major themes that emerged from the collected data are presented.
11.1. Similarities/dissimilarities in the language on Saudi University websites

The textual representation on the sample university “Home” pages maintains a promotional discourse by frequently celebrating the achievements of major individuals who are engaged in the university’s activities. This process enhances the university’s image and establishes its identity (Toma et al., 2005). The textual discourse also uses highly relational language to engage viewers and to encourage further reading and more information seeking. This technique seems to be in line with research on the marketing of higher education and CDA (e.g., Fairclough, 1993; Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015). Moreover, a sense of local and global connection is promoted by using short descriptive phrases. In addition, the repetition of success stories and accomplishments is used to establish a unique identity and to foreground reputation, the overall estimation of which incorporates four key elements: credibility, trustworthiness, reliability and responsibility (Chernyavskaya & Safronenkova, 2019; Christensen et al., 2019).

However, the poor placement and occasional absence of important information, such as information on the application process, undergraduate and graduate majors, which major to choose and financial support, force viewers to click through other pages. This problem stands in stark contrast to the recommendations of research on web design, student preferences and major choice (Adelman, 2006; Krug, 2006; Schneider, 2006).

Regarding visual discourse, most of the sample “Home” pages display recurrent primary images of beautiful outdoor and indoor buildings and vibrant classrooms to emphasize uniqueness and intimacy, a practice that is in line with the academic marketing literature (e.g., Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Osei-Kofi & Torres, 2015; Schneider, 2006). The design of the “Home” pages also features a horizontal triptych, and the “Events” section emphasizes current activities on and off campus. Navigation menus provide admissions-oriented topics; however, no audience-oriented topics are shown except on the KAUST website. In general, the sample “Home” pages use a light colour scheme based on the university’s official colours, indicating an effort to create brand identity (Anctil, 2008; Chernyavskaya, 2019; Mautner, 2005).

On the “About” page, which is predominantly textual, the sample universities employ self-promotional language to further show their individuality and prestige (Anctil, 2008; Askehave, 2007; Saichae, 2010). The historical text on this page aims to show eminence and to appeal to as many prospective students as possible. However, little attention is paid to the universities’ campus, the student learning experience, academic and/or athletic achievements, or global and local relevance.

Furthermore, the discourse is powered by each university’s vision, mission and goals. The samples mainly focus on social constructs, that is, claims that could be untruthful or made for public consumption (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). In addition, terms such as “leaders”, “Vision 2030”, “distinguished education” and “competent” appear frequently without further explanations, creating uncertainty. Notably, there is an avoidance of discourse on international rankings or university outcomes in relation to future public and private sectors. In fact, the way in which the universities state their rankings on their institutional websites raises an ethical issue. Since rankings have become part of the process of university recruitment internationally, they must be conducted in an ethically engaged manner (Topuniversities, 2012).

11.2. Social constructs

The findings of the present study suggest that the university website samples lack diversity in their representation of gender and race. In fact, the samples pay very little attention to these issues, even though they lie at the heart of the rhetoric on the websites of international universities (Taylor & Morphew, 2010). KAUST is the only university in the sample to briefly address only geographical diversity textually and visually. Furthermore, KAUST is the only university in the sample that shows men and women in non-traditional Middle Eastern clothing. The reason for this depiction is KAUST’s goal of becoming a world-class, graduate-level research university. This vision is constructed by the liberated nature reflected in the language used and the images shown
on the website. It is also reflected in how the website depicts social constructs such as race and gender; hence, the university aspires to attract educated viewers nationally and internationally.

According to the Saudi Ministry of Education’s Statistics Center and Decision Support, 49.4% of university students and 40.8% of university staff are female. However, the representation of women on the sample websites ranges between 0% and 18%, excluding KAUST, which shows almost equal numbers of male and female actors. Moreover, Brown individuals dominate the primary images on the “Home” pages in the sample (94%); non-Brown individuals represent only 6% of the people in such images. Additionally, high-ranking university officials and academics seem to dominate the textual and visual discourse of the university websites, leaving little room for students and other social actors.

In summary, to comply with societal norms and avoid tense topics, it is apparent that social constructs are underrepresented on the sample websites (Del Vecchio, 2017; Fairclough, 2001; Urciuoli, 2009; Wang, 2008).

11.3. The theme of promotional discourse
The textual and visual data in the sample tend to be informational and moderately promotional in nature. The reason for this combination might be the national and international shift towards the commodification of higher education and the fact that most Saudi universities are still government-funded institutions. Hence, traces of normative representations of attractive university social life are emphasized. The breadth of the purposefully selected visuals that dominate the sample aims to create a strong positive impression on viewers (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). In this vein, Pippert et al. (2013) claimed that potential students mostly tend to visualize themselves on a campus through marketing materials. Furthermore, Saichaie and Morphew (2014) found that “student life” sections on university websites often incorporate different themes of tradition and shared experiences, communicating the personality of the campus.

11.4. The theme of similarity
The findings of this study show a great deal of discourse similarity between the sample websites regardless of the differences between them in terms of type, history or geographical location. The notion of “sameness” is found among both reputable and developing universities to appear to viewers as attractive, prestigious and legitimate (Bok, 2003). According to Hoang & Rojas-Lizana (2015), as universities adopt a promotional discourse to market themselves, there is a similarity in the language that they use.

11.5. The theme of control
The promotional discourse, which is similar across all the sample websites, means that the universities are in direct control of the information with which viewers interact. This control is clear in how universities foreground unnecessary information, while the type of academic competence, skillsets and student accountability needed for success are not emphasized. In doing so, a contradiction might emerge between university control and the relational language that a university uses, promoting students’ power and independence (Fairclough, 2001).

11.6. The theme of vagueness
The descriptive analysis of the sample websites reveals limited textual content providing viewers with superficial information about important topics such as registration, academic majors, the campus, benefits, and financial aid. Even images do not effectively relate to these topics, as most of them show general scenes of university life and news updates. This practice may lead to uncertainty and shift control away from viewers to producers (Fairclough, 1995, 2001).

12. Conclusion
In terms of their development, higher education websites require great attention. Through their use of language as a medium of information and representation, websites are becoming more
important for both universities and students. This qualitative study aimed to search for the similarities and differences in the language used by Saudi universities to represent themselves on their official websites. It also aimed to explore how language is used to represent social constructs (e.g., gender and race) on these websites. This study finds that the textual representation of the examined “Home” establishes a promotional discourse by regularly celebrating the contributions of individuals engaged in the universities’ activities. The results also show that the sample university websites lack diversity in their representation of gender and race. The social structures on the sample websites are underrepresented to comply with social expectations and avoid tense topics, while textual and visual data appear to be insightful and mildly promotional in nature. Regardless of the variations in terms of form, background or geographical location, a great deal of discourse similarity among the sample websites is highlighted. The similar promotional debate among all the sample websites suggests that universities have direct control over the data communicated to viewers. Finally, the descriptive review of the sample websites reveals limited textual content, giving viewers superficial details on important subjects such as enrolment, academic majors, the campus, benefits, and financial aid.

13. Practical implications of this study

13.1. The underrepresented

Through research, partnerships with international academic organizations and scholarship grants to foreign students, Saudi universities aspire to become reputable and recognized institutions regionally and internationally. Therefore, it is crucial for these academic institutions to acknowledge underrepresented individuals by embracing and promoting diversity. The findings of this study suggest that gender, race, religion and ethnicity are poorly represented, both visually and textually, in the discourse of the sample websites. Hence, it is incumbent upon universities to address this issue in a subtle and authentic manner that ensures that underrepresented individuals are not depicted as “different” or “unfamiliar but non-threatening”, as these types of stereotypical depictions can isolate them even further (Urciuoli, 2009). Selecting appropriate images that depict ethnic diversity will enhance efforts to approach multi-ethnic students if these images are more authentic (Del Vecchio, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to place much more emphasis on selecting appropriate images for the “Home” page and “About” page in particular. Higher education institutions need an effective website to help attract new academic staff and students and to serve the needs of current students. Furthermore, these institutions need to rebuild and modify their websites so that they can globally disseminate the opportunities that await prospective students and the academic achievements of current students, which will make it easier for universities to better portray their attractive, positive cultural prospects worldwide. Private and state accreditation organizations do not oversee each higher education institution individually; in fact, they represent administrators, academics, students, stakeholders and culture. For this reason, a website should be developed to ensure that higher education institutions are providing a “basic level of quality” and that each institution is easily accessible (Manzoor et al., 2012).

13.2. Self-branding

In a mimicking practice, all the universities in the sample portray themselves as modern and reputable, but in reality, they are different. Little attention is paid to the aspects that make each unique. For example, UJ has an accelerated bachelor’s programme for talented students, but it promotes the programme with only a very small image on its “Home” page and one link to a very short text on its “About” page. According to Fairclough (2013), this practice is a drawback of promotional discourse versus informational discourse as the potential readers of websites may strive to find appropriate answers to their questions. Therefore, it is important for university leaders to focus on the quality of information and areas of strength rather than quantity (Grodsky & Jones, 2007). Universities can conduct promotional online/traditional campaigns that provide the target audiences with useful information about majors, admissions, scholarships and all of the need-to-know details (Morphew, & Eckel, 2009). Another suggestion would be to carefully reflect on institutional mission statements, as they are able to generate a sense of realistic direction and purpose tailored to society’s needs. In terms of the use of language, highlighting the accomplishments of universities via websites can assert their academic reputation and, thus, the
reputation of the academic institution. Bringing the most impressive accomplishments from faculty together onto a single page is an effective strategy for attracting potential applicants and stakeholders.

14. Future research

Based on the findings and discussion of the present study, there are some potential directions for future research related to the website representations of Saudi universities. As the sample in this study is relatively small, larger-scale future studies might be conducted to examine the website representations of universities across the strata of colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, discourse comparisons could be performed between the website representations of private and public institutions, as this issue is rarely addressed in research. Moreover, the current study managed to analyse only the “Home” page and “About” page of the sample universities. However, to enrich the discussion on this topic, it would be worthwhile to analyse other webpages such as those on “Admissions”, “Student Life” and “Academic Programmes”. Another important research direction is to investigate the relationship between and the influence of popular social media outlets on the discourse on official university websites. Finally, a combination of CDA and other qualitative research techniques would be very useful in further expanding our understanding of how and why institutions portray themselves online in a certain way.

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Notes

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3. https://uqu.edu.sa/en/App/News/75,549
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6. https://www.uj.edu.sa/Pages-N247.aspx
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14. https://about.uj.edu.sa/Pages-why-uj.aspx
15. https://about.uj.edu.sa/Pages-why-uj.aspx
16. https://www.kaust.edu.sa/Pages-Vision-And-Objectives.aspx
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18. https://uqu.edu.sa/en/main/AboutUs
19. http://tiny.cc/rfjhmz
20. https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/Pages-Vision-And-Objectives.aspx
21. https://uqu.edu.sa/en/main/54,289
22. https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/about/vision
23. https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/live
24. https://www.tu.edu.sa/Attachments/TU_IMG_0040.jpg
25. https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en
26. https://www.tu.edu.sa/
27. https://uqu.edu.sa/en/main/AboutUs
28. https://darnj.uj.edu.sa/Default.aspx?Site_ID=991&lng=AR
29. https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/about
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