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PRAGMATIC CHARGE OF VISUAL RESOURCES IN CONSTRUCTING POSITIVE UNIVERSITY REPUTATION: BASED ON TEXTS AT UNIVERSITY WEBSITES

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Abstract. Drawing on the interpretation of visual images as a social semiotic resource of meaning making, this paper discusses how visual resources contribute to establishing symbolic capital in academic discourse. It is based on approaches in discourse analyses and social semiotics and reflects the social semiotic concept of visual validity. The object of the undertaken analysis is university academic reputation. The study rests on the research of texts published on the websites of 30 Russian national research and federal universities. It presumes that reputation is the informational track of past actions focused today in the digital space. At the university websites, it is reflected in an extended and detailed representation of the past activities and achievements of the national university. We suggest that the information on the university websites is not to be seen as just adding of new details in information exchange, but rather as pragmatically value-based selected information. Evaluative representation of the university past records through images (photography) is revealed as a special tool to distinguish an academic institution and make it visible and superior for different stakeholders. Images are considered as a part of the processes of shaping social values.

Keywords: visuality, visual validity, social semiotics, university reputation, university website.

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Научная статья

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ПРАГМАТИКА ВИЗУАЛЬНЫХ СРЕДСТВ В СОЗДАНИИ ПОЛОЖИТЕЛЬНОЙ РЕПУТАЦИИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТА (НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ ТЕКСТОВ, ОПУБЛИКОВАННЫХ НА САЙТАХ РОССИЙСКИХ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ)

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Аннотация. Визуальные знаки рассматриваются как семиотические ресурсы, участвующие в порождении и восприятии смысла. В рамках статьи анализируется, как визуальные средства включаются в создание символического капитала институции в академическом дискурсе. Анализ базируется на теоретических и методологических подходах в дискурсивном анализе и социальной семиотике, учитывает выработанную в рамках этих исследовательских подходов концепцию визуальной доказательности. В этой перспективе рассматривается академическая репутация современного университета. Материалом для анализа послужили тексты, опубликованные на сайтах 30 российских федеральных и национальных исследовательских университетов. Академическая репутация рассматривается как «информационный след» о событиях и действиях университета в прошлом, влияющий на оценку в настоящем и будущем. Информация на сайте анализируется не только как прибавление новых деталей, что делает возможным современная цифровая среда, но как прагматический, ценностно-ориентированный отбор информации для создания позитивной репутации университетской корпорации. Показывается, что визуальные образы, фотографии действуют как особое семиотическое средство, создающее оценочную прагматику текстов, конструирующее заметность и академическое превосходство университета. Визуальный ресурс включен в оценочную интерпретацию и процесс смыслопорождения.

Ключевые слова: визуальность, визуальная доказательность, социальная семиотика, репутация университета, сайт университета.

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Introduction

Drawing on the understanding of visual images as a social semiotic resource, this paper discusses how visual resources contribute to establishing symbolic capital and reputation in academic discourse. The object of the undertaken analysis is a university academic reputation, i.e. an evaluative opinion about the university. Increased internationalization and mobility raised competition of universities both at the national and international scale. Thus, the pressure over universities to legitimize societal engagements and to establish their credentials is raised. The increased accountability of universities towards society focuses new strategies in image transition and reputation building activities. Major aspects concerning transformations and a new mission of the university have been intensively investigated in [1–3]. The modern studies reveal that competition is the result of university development and also a response to the growing



promotional culture in higher education. As Bhatia puts it, today universities are challenged to preserve the status of excellence and should come closer to the idea of a market, where everyone should compete with everyone else for clients' attention [4]. Reputation is going online, which means online visibility and, in this regard, a wider access to past activities of an organization for information consumers and experts. The digital environment changed the way of social communications and the way consumers search for information. Thus, a convergence in terms of technology, communication and content for the creation of an information web has occurred. The convergence has caused new and valuable digital media to share the social experiences and knowledge. The trustworthiness and reputation are considered to be part of the knowledge society which contribute to the social capital of an institution.

Driven by the new digital culture, universities at the international scale modified their presence online. The infrastructure of web sites is changed as a reflection of new dimensions in approaching and highlighting information. University web pages are seen as a critical medium in communicative practices. The university homepages reflect their changing practices. The recent studies reveal the shift in the architecture and function of the websites from providing access to information about educational issues to promoting university as a social agent. It is to be stressed, the digital information is not about how to add new details in information exchange, it is about reorganized, value-based selected information. As Lemke puts it, websites are material-semiotic phenomena, the technologies and cultural practices associated with this medium change "who we are linked to" and to "which social forces and agents we must become responsive" [5]. The medium and semiotic resources used within that medium construct values and social meanings to others. The infrastructure of university web pages has been modified. Zhang and O'Halloran comment that the reasons for these "overhauls" rest with the progress of technologies and are highly intertwined with the changing social space of their use. The university websites reflect changing nature of academic discourse, managerialism and promotional culture. Thus, the values and identities they communicate and their evolution over time can be observed and analyzed [6]. The research question under discussion is on how past activities of the university are reflected while presenting the actual strategic goals and mission, how past records contribute to the reputation building of the Russian university. In view of this, the paper addresses the visibility of the national university as an aspect of its social actions and strategy, visibility is discussed as visibility.

Methodology

The analysis of the practices of visual meaning making in the digital space is informed by discursive analysis and social semiotic approach following the studies of Halliday, Kress, van Leeuwen, Rose, which represent the long-standing research interest in meaning making beyond the language [7–10]. The paper takes semiotic (linguistic and visual) resources as constructing social meanings in discourse. It is in line with the social semiotic concept of visual validity as introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen [11] and of photographic validity to use the term as discussed by Boeriis [12]. Boeriis investigates the concept of photographic reality, and discusses that photography provides a "sense of nearness and immediacy that we do not experience with any other types of images" [12]. Visual images are involved in the generation of evidence. According to C. Jewitt, "meanings are shaped by the norms and rules operating at the moment of sign making, influenced by the motivations and interests of the sign maker in a specific social context" [13]. That means that images are signs that might be used not (just) to represent reality, but rather to represent ways in which social actors perceive and interpret reality, for more details see [14–16].

The investigation rests on the results of the empirical research of texts published on the websites of 30 Russian national research and federal universities.

University Identity and Reputation Building

According to Steiner et al, organizational identity reflects the values and value-based activities of organization's actors [17], it sets up a framework to perceive and interpret information about what the



organization is. It is an organizational self-definition of “who we are”. The external self-representation works as a vehicle for university identification among stakeholders, students, employers. Based on interpretation of how an institution is perceived by the outer stakeholders, image and reputation are discussed as different dimensions in institutional representation. Image is considered as an immediate, short-term perception founded on impressions about the organization, for more details see e.g. [18]. Reputation is the evaluative reactions of others, of external stakeholders. It is a special kind of social information. Reputation is seen as the informational track of past actions. In Origgi’s words, it is the credibility that an individual or a social group wins through social interactions. Thus, reputation might be explained as “seals of approval or disapproval” [19]. Each socio-cultural practice generates a set of standards, which determine the notion of the reputation in a given society. The reputation can be seen as a set of actions or other manifestations, which are relevant within a certain community. Certain characteristic features make them recognizable. The reputation also works as an “information strainer”, which reflects evaluative attitude to a personality or an institution. The reputation is not equal to image, which means evaluative attitude of an individual to another object or themselves. When describing the issue of the reputation it is essential to see what is considered as positive, desirable and obligatory by the representative majority. The reputation is an obtained and long-standing public appraisal of an institution, the cause and result of its practical work. In contrast, the notion of image refers to some dynamically changing characteristics. This is a tactical notion which can be easily measured and adjusted for the current situation. When considering the notion of image, sustainability and repetition of evaluative statements about an object are of crucial importance.

As an academic reputation, we shall regard professional appraisal within a scientific academic community, recognition by specialists. Thus, the academic reputation is based on such concepts as recognition, trust and honour [19]. Trust is generally accepted as a key constituent of the reputation. It is trust, that triggers mechanisms for approving of correct and disapproving of unacceptable behaviour in the scientific community.

In a social perspective a reputation can be of two kinds: a personal reputation and an institutional reputation. As an institutional reputation, we shall describe a set of beliefs and expectations about an organization, its mission, functions and history involved in multi-factor relationship system in the social environment. The institutional reputation reflects its history, resources, strategic goals involved in the social context. When addressed to the university, the notion of the reputation is associated with other notions – corporate, institutional culture; branding, reputation management. Knowledge-based and information-based society have put forward new challenges for higher education and its institutional management. Increasing efforts towards self-presenting the university might be an outcome of information-based society: university’s characteristics should be prominent to be easily recognizable. In this regard university’s public perception is considered to be an instrument for social recognition and acceptance. It is an effective tool to be used to distinguish the university profile in shared information space.

The reputation as a multitude of external stakeholders’ views and opinions depends on many factors. Among them are the quality of educational services, professional academic staff expertise, graduates’ professional competencies, business-friendly environment and commercialization of the scientific research. Today the reputation is described as an integral indicator of “university excellence” and includes objective characteristics of the university namely quality and content of the education provided, operating and technical facilities and evaluative views about the university reputation in the minds of different stakeholders. This primarily means that building a reputation is about using tools positively evaluated by the society and those which have a positive effect. For the university as a social agent its background is discussed and represented primarily as a university tradition. The latter is controversial and ambiguous. The notion of “a university tradition” is of dynamic character as it actively bends to international political and ideological circumstances. Current ideas on university traditions mainly rely on both written and non-written norms, rules and description of the past. Such a narrative is always produced to meet certain needs – to self-iden-



tify, to advertise, to glorify the university as a desired environment; several aspects of these issues have been discussed in [17, 19].

The present paper undertakes to demonstrate how the university academic reputation is translated in the perspective of the present-day university mission and how academic reputation establishment reflects the relationship between past and present activities of university. Establishing a long historical perspective over the university performance becomes of crucial significance. In this framework, we seek to identify how the connection of the past and the present in the university performance is established through university's self-presentation within its mission. This link encourages us to reflect on what has already been considered as the past along with the actual context of setting new functions of the university.

Material and Interpretation

Presenting of the past becomes a specific means of expressing the university identity. Section about historical past is an important component in navigation content on the websites. The studied university websites contain corresponding sections like “History and Honours”; “Our Past”; “History, traditions and goals”, sometimes with different headings. That self-presentation is done through a detailed description of the historical context referring to the date of foundation of the institution as a starting point for its reputation. While representing historical background, the websites show the history of the university establishment, detailed information about the rectors and prominent researchers affiliated with it, memories of those who witnessed its development and the graduates, pictures of the original invention prototypes revealing the university involvement in the major historical events of the state, historic statutes and detailed rules for the students, keeping original spelling of the 19th century texts. A common practice is to list prominent Firsts. The university reputation management with “History” heading is not limited to talking about legacy and traditions, but is linked to current accomplishments and vision of the future.

A characteristic example is the section of History at the website of the ITMO University, one of the top Russian universities. We can see a deep visual perspective on university development and milestones, while visual images and verbal texts provide an extensive view starting from the foundation year of 1900, when a college for experts in Fine Mechanics and Optics, the very first in Russia, was founded by Emperor Nicholai II (Fig. 1). It also shows first research laboratory equipment (Fig. 2), first computer developed by university researchers to make technical breakthroughs (Fig. 3), first laser laboratory to eliminate expensive importing from abroad (Fig. 4) and so on, from one event and achievement in the past to another.

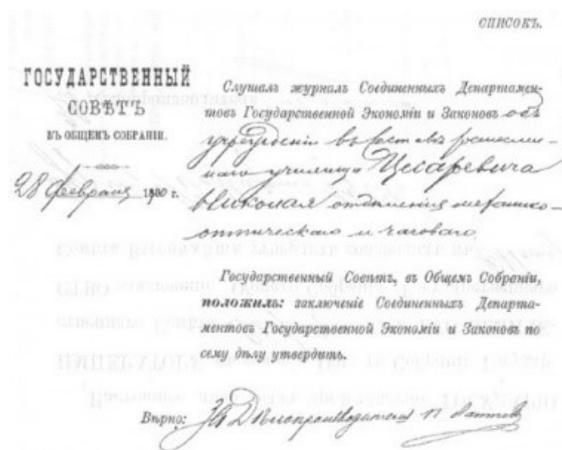


Fig. 1. The decree of Emperor Nicholai II, 1900
<https://en.itmo.ru/en/history/>

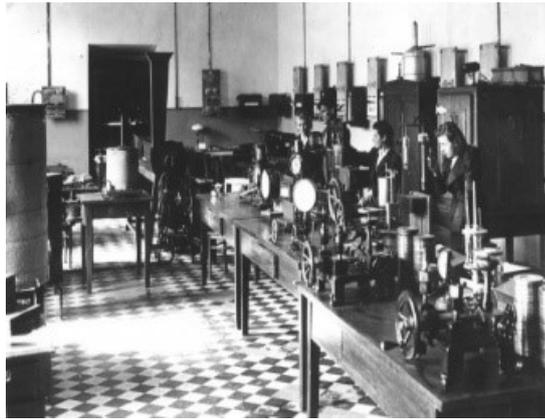


Fig. 2. First Research Lab, 1934
<https://en.itmo.ru/en/history/>

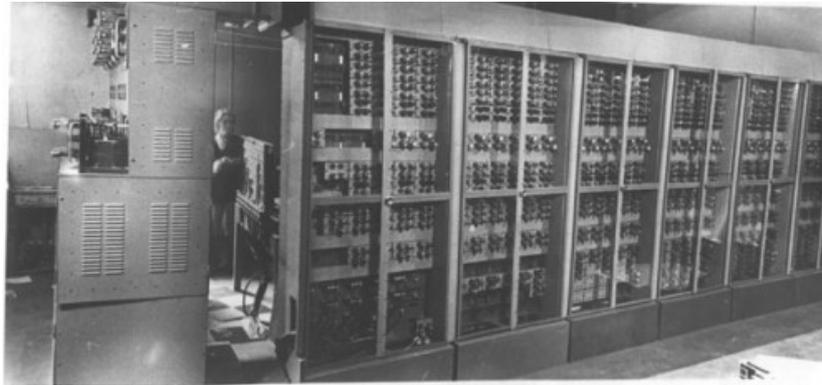


Fig. 3. First Computer for Engineering, Circa 1958
<https://en.itmo.ru/en/history/>



Fig. 4. Laser Technology Laboratory, 1972
<https://en.itmo.ru/en/history/>



Fig. 5. Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University homepage
<https://english.spbstu.ru/university/about-the-university/history/>

Figures are retrieved on September 15, 2022, from ITMO University homepage <https://en.itmo.ru/en/history/History>.

Another example in this regard comes from Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University. The website contains section “Our History”, which has the following design. The initial page in the section of “Our History” (Fig. 5) shows three photographs, edge-to-edge: the members of the first university board in 1902 headed by the first rector Prince Gagarin; the present-day students who have created an electronic “Memory book” containing the information about the University lectures and students who died during the Second World War; a museum desk of the first engineers. This visual image unites both the merits in the past and in the present.

Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 are retrieved on September 15, 2022, from Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University homepage <https://english.spbstu.ru/university/about-the-university/history/laboratories-classes/>

Visual reference to long-standing traditions is like a marketing gimmick: previous achievements are perceived as part of the present-day activities of the university. Past events set a standard for reliable evaluation of the present performance. They are introduced both as competitive factors and an advantage in rivalry for the current position.

The perspective of this study resonates with findings on evolution of the webpages of the leading national universities in China [20, 21]. Xiong observes that geographical location, scenery and history are foregrounded in university promotion. History is a distinguished selling point for academic institution, providing prestige and excellence [20]. In highlighting the history in their timeline, universities are able to capitalize on distinguishing features that makes them elite to the stakeholders. In this regard, it should be mentioned that sections representing university’s history and describing the past are shown in a detailed manner in Russian versions of homepages. Glorified look and scale of the historical past display a trend of the Russian national university towards the internal stakeholders. The corresponding sections in English basically look shorter and contain only main dates and events. There are English sites

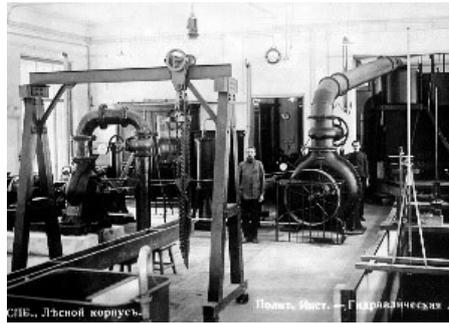


Fig. 6. Laboratory of Electrical machines



Fig. 7. Physical Laboratory

not providing historical background of the university; in contrast their Russian versions give detailed information about the historical events university was involved in.

Conclusion

Self-presentation in the historical context contributes significantly to identifying a modern national university. Evaluative representation of the past records is demonstrated as the university corporation memory, endorsed partly by facts, reference to historical chronology of the events, people's biographies, achievements and results. Having a history has become constitutive part of identity of the university's members, an indicator of its long-standing reputation. Texts about the past shape an expectation about the future actions. From this perspective, images (photography) are considered as a part of the processes of shaping social values, and thus are made to meaningful objects. Images like verbal devices are involved in the distribution of knowledge and value-based content.

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