

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Commercialization of Higher Education in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the Business School Undergraduate Admissions Prospectuses

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How to cite this paper: Ma, R. (2024). A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Commercialization of Higher Education in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the Business School Undergraduate Admissions Prospectuses. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 14, 573-581.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2024.144030>

Received: June 6, 2024

Accepted: July 26, 2024

Published: July 29, 2024

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Abstract

With the influence of promotion culture, the commercialization of higher education has become a trend. To further understand the impact of promotional culture on the discourse practice of universities in Hong Kong, this study uses Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis theory to conduct text analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice analysis of the business school undergraduate admissions prospectuses of the top 3 universities and two private universities in Hong Kong. The results show that all five universities use first-person and second-person pronouns to narrow the distance between the school and the readers. In addition, all five schools use a large number of evaluative adjectives and superlative forms to promote the quality of their education while presenting the school information, to make the higher education service more specific. The two private schools put more emphasis on the beautiful campus environment to increase their competitiveness. In terms of syntax, the prospectuses of these five schools form a generic intertext with advertising discourse. The combination of short sentences, phrases, pictures, and colors impresses readers deeply in a short time. In terms of social practice, the five schools promote their international education to cater to the tastes of the education market.

Keywords

Commercialization, Promotional Culture, Higher Education, Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

Nowadays we live in a society surrounded by information, especially in a commercial society inundated with advertising information and “promotional culture” (Frank & Wernick, 1993). Frank and Wernick (1993) explained that “Promotional culture is the ‘semiotic colonization’ of culture by commercial advertising”, which means the phenomenon of self-advertising in other areas of life. It emphasizes the importance of branding, image-building, and reputation management to attract and retain customers. Under the influence of promotional culture, the commercialization phenomenon has emerged in the field of higher education, that is, using marketing strategies to attract potential students. As a window for schools to provide information to potential students, the admissions prospectus is a way for schools to achieve self-promotion under the influence of promotional culture. Based on this, the paper analyzes the undergraduate admissions prospectuses of business schools at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), Hong Kong Shue Yan University (HKSJU), and Hang Seng University of Hong Kong (HSUHK). By using Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework theory, this paper explores how promotional culture influences the discourse practice in these five schools.

2. Literature Review

Due to the increasing influence of market forces on higher education, the commercialization of academic discourse as defined by Fairclough (1993) has become a popular research topic. In recent years, many scholars have used multimodal discourse analysis to analyze the commercialization of higher education in different countries and regions. Zhang and O’Halloran (2013) analyzed the commercialization process of the admission website of the National University of Singapore over 14 years; Shahnaz and Qadir (2022) analyzed the marketing role of school badges in Pakistan; Zhang (2017) analyzed the marketing strategy of “About Us” section of the homepage of the top five universities in China.

These studies primarily concentrated on the visual aspects of commercialization, such as images and color schemes, and were focused on public institutions. Building upon this body of research, the present study aims to expand the scope of investigation by examining the lexical and syntactic features of commercialization discourse within higher education. Additionally, this research seeks to compare and contrast the discourse practices of public and private universities in Hong Kong under the influence of promotional culture. By doing so, this study will contribute to filling the existing gaps in the literature and provide a foundation for further research about the commercialization of higher education.

3. Methodology and Data

Three-dimensional framework theory was raised by Fairclough (1993) as a method of critical discourse analysis. In Fairclough’s (1993) words, “Each discourse

has three dimensions or facts: it is a spoken or written language text, it is an instance of discursive practice involving the production and interpretation of the text, and it is a piece of social practice". So, this study analyzes text, discursive practice, and social practice in those prospectuses. In terms of the analysis of discursive practice, the theory of intertextuality is also used to show the generic intertextuality between the prospectuses and advertising discourse.

HKU, CUHK, and HKUST are chosen as research samples because these three colleges are the first-tier schools in Hong Kong and can represent the highest level of education in Hong Kong. HKSJU and HSUHK are chosen because they are two private universities in Hong Kong, which are generally more profit-oriented. The research objects of this paper include both public and private colleges in Hong Kong, which makes the research results more representative.

4. Analysis of Text

The analysis of text is form and meaning analysis, which includes the analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and relations between sentences (Fairclough, 1993). In this paper, the research focuses on the use of personal pronouns, and the use of adjectives. As Fairclough (1992) contended, conversationalization is one of the most striking trends of discursive changes affected by the commodification of social practice. He further explained that "conversationalization means the simulation of private, face-to-face, person-to-person discourse in public mass media" (Fairclough, 1992). In prospectuses, the use of personal pronouns can reflect the degree of conversationalization. Therefore, the research calculates the frequency of "we", "you", "the programme/the school" and "students/candidates" in the prospectuses to explore whether the colleges use the first-person and second-person pronouns to express closeness. At the same time, the study also summarizes the high-frequency adjectives that are used more than three times in the prospectuses.

4.1. Analysis of Personal Pronouns

The University program and the students are the two main players in the prospectuses. As we can see from Table 1, all five schools are more likely to use the first-person pronoun "we" to represent "the programme" or "the school", which Fairclough (1992) called "synthetic personalization". This phenomenon often appears in advertising discourse, where advertisers use "we" and "you" to bring them closer to potential consumers. In the prospectuses, words like "the school" or "the programme" tend to be concentrated at the beginning of the text or the beginning of each paragraph, and "we" tend to appear in the later part of the text. For example, in the prospectus of HKU, the first sentence of the text is "The HKU Business School is committed to fostering the development of its undergraduate students, who represent over 20 nationalities." As the first sentence of the text, the subject of this sentence is "Business school", and the purpose is to introduce the basic information of the school to the reader. In the later part of

the text, the subject of the sentence changes to “we”. For example, “We continue to enhance our curricula to incorporate recent developments in different fields of study”. The shift of subject can close the distance between the students who are reading the prospectus and the school. The same situation also appears in the prospectuses of the other schools. For example, in HSUHK, “we” is used to represent the faculty and the program. The sentence “we offer lots of internship opportunities to help students acquire practical knowledge and related work experience” shows the strengths of the school in helping students in their careers in a gracious tone by using “we”. So, we can see this approach can help schools establish a conversational, informal relationship with students, and to construct a friendly image of schools.

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

Colleges	Words	We	The Programme/ The School	You	Student(s)/ Candidate(s)
HKU		10	3	8	4
CUHK		15	6	8	5
HKUST		14	5	7	4
HKSJU		12	8	6	6
HSUHK		14	9	8	6

Similarly, the use of “you” gives students who are reading the prospectuses a stronger sense of engagement. For example, in the prospectus of CUHK, the sentence “Let’s create a future that you look forward to today” can inspire readers and make them realize that the school will help them achieve their dreams. In HSUHK, the sentence “see for yourself the excellent environment that you could join” invites students who read the prospectus to visit the school. The use of “you” not only gives students an equal dialogue with the school, but also gives them a sense of being valued as potential customers. This is a way for colleges to promote themselves so that students can get information about the schools and feel the affinity of the schools. In addition, the study also finds the use of the word “I” to refer to potential applicants in the prospectus of both private schools. For example, the two sentences “I did not study business subjects in secondary school, can I apply for the programmes offered by the school of business?” (HSUHK) and “Can I choose more than one concentration?” (HKSJU) raise questions in the tone of applicants, and show the information by answering the questions. This can make applicants feel more involved while reading the prospectuses and feel the schools are willing to answer their questions.

4.2. Analysis of Adjectives

In addition to the use of personal pronouns, the study also summarizes the high-frequency adjectives in the prospectuses and finds that they have promo-

tional features. Zhang (2017) stated that using a lot of descriptive words like evaluative adjectives and superlative forms can emphasize a university's background in terms of history, education, and research. However, these types of expressions are meant to persuade people about the university's quality rather than just provide information. In other words, they are more promotional in nature.

In terms of the use of adjectives, we can see that the high-frequency words in the prospectuses of the five universities all include superlative adjectives, such as "the best", "one of the youngest" and "the first" (Table 2). These words not only inform the readers the strength of the colleges but also help to show the colleges' kernel of the sales message (Leech, 1966). In addition to this common denominator, the five schools also construct their own unique and competitive image in the use of adjectives. For example, HKU's use of the term "tailor-made" shows its concern and respect for the characteristics of students, and reflects the diversity of teaching modes. CUHK uses the word "meaningful" to show the humanistic care of the school, which focuses not only on teaching results, but also on the meaning of teaching. HKUST uses "one of the youngest" to highlight the school's vitality. In terms of the two private schools, both of them emphasize their education quality and the help they can offer students in their careers. For example, the sentence in the prospectus of HSUHK "the quality of our programmes is proven by the many awards won by our students in various competitions", and the sentence in the prospectus of HKSYU "our program provides well-rounded business training to students". These descriptions see higher education as a service, the awards of students and the employment training are the embodiment of the service to attract potential customers. In addition, private schools also use the campus environment as one of the selling points, for example, HSUHK has a description of "excellent environment" to improve their competitiveness in the market.

Table 2. High-frequency adjectives.

Colleges	Adjectives
HKU	The best, professional, tailor-made, pioneering, international, global
CUHK	High-achieving, the first, nimble, meaningful, first-hand, one of the most established, international, global
HKUST	One of the first, one of the youngest, most respected, international, global
HKSYU	Professional, one of the earliest, well-rounded, global
HSUHK	Excellent, professional, high quality, one of the most popular, global

5. Analysis of Discursive Practice

The analysis of discursive practice is concerned with sociocognitive aspects of text production and interpretation (Fairclough, 1993). In this part, the paper focuses on the generic intertextuality of the prospectuses which refers to the mix-

ing and blending of different styles or genre features of a discourse (Xin, 2009).

There is a generic intertextuality between the style of the prospectuses and advertisements. Generally speaking, advertisements will use short sentences with pictures related to the product so that consumers can get the important information in the shortest time. In these prospectuses, there are also sections with informative headings, which can help readers quickly grasp the information they need. For example, in **Figure 1**, CUHK divides the complete sentence “Our vision is to develop global business leaders for the Asian Century” into two parts. This allows readers to quickly locate the content they are interested in through the subheadings. In **Figure 2**, HKUST uses phrases instead of complete sentences to list the support that the business school will provide to its students. In **Figure 3**, the section of the prospectus in HKU is even accompanied by relevant pictures. In this part, the text that mentions internships and the picture also show a person standing in an office, which easily reminds readers of getting internship opportunities after entering school. These strategies form generic intertext with advertising discourse, which allows readers to get more information they want in a short time. The combination of pictures and text also makes the school’s “career services” more visible. In **Figure 4**, we can see an imperative sentence “For further more information please click here.” According to *Askehave (2007)*, “the imperative clause is an ‘attention-seeking’ advice known from promotional and advertising discourse.” The imperative sentence here can attract applicants to know more about the college. In addition, in **Figure 5**, the study finds that most of the subheadings of the five prospectuses are in colors of the corresponding school emblem, which can further enhance the impression of potential applicants on these colleges. Combined with pictures, phrases, larger-sized titles, and colors, the admissions prospectuses are more like advertisements promoting their programs to students.

Vision & Mission

Our Vision

To develop global business leaders for the Asian Century.

Figure 1. Prospectus of CUHK.

Value-enhancing Support

- Career Opportunities Seminar Series by Professional Bodies
- Industry-sponsored Internships
- Mentorship Programme
- Networking Activities with Seasoned Practitioners
- Overseas Exchanges
- Round Table Talks with Market Practitioners
- Thematic Visits to AMPB Firms

Figure 2. Prospectus of HKUST.

Exciting Opportunities

Participate in overseas exchange programmes, tailor-made professional preparation programmes and exclusive internship opportunities with renowned accounting firms and financial institutions.



Figure 3. Prospectus of HKU.

Institute of Financial Planners of Hong Kong (IFPHK)

Graduates of our Financial Services and Planning concentration will obtain the exemptions on the CFPCM Certification Education Program* of the Institute of Financial Planners of Hong Kong (IFPHK) on the following three courses:

- Course 1: Investment Planning and Asset Management
- Course 2: Insurance Planning and Risk Management
- Course 3: Tax Planning and Estate Planning

Besides, graduates of Bachelor's Degree in any discipline are eligible for exemption from the 120-hour AFP Certification Education Program.

*subject to transcript review by the IFPHK; for further information please click [here](#).



Figure 4. Prospectus of HKSJU.

- Accounting and Business Planning
- Corporate Finance
- Global Strategy
- Marketing Management

The programme therefore enables students to follow a pathway of studies to prepare them for pursuing a managerial career. Students enrolled in this one-year full-time programme can complete it up to 5 years, giving them flexibility to meet their practical needs arising from their job or family commitments.

Career Prospects

- Bank Manager
- Business Executive
- Marketing or Sales Professional
- Product Development Manager
- Financial Analyst
- Export Manager
- Management Consultant
- Auditor / Accountant
- Company Secretary
- Researcher

就業前景

- 銀行經理
- 企業行政人員
- 市場營銷主任
- 產品開發經理
- 金融分析員
- 出口經理
- 企業管理顧問
- 核數師/會計師
- 公司秘書
- 研究員

Figure 5. Prospectus of HSUHK.

6. Analysis of Social Practice

Social practices “mediate” the relationship between general and abstract social structures and particular and concrete social events; social fields, institutions, and organizations are constituted as networks of social practices (Fairclough, 2013). In this part, this paper focuses on the special context provided by the social characteristics of Hong Kong. In the prospectuses of the five schools, the words “international” and “global” are their common high-frequency adjectives. For example, the sentence “CUHK Business School has blazed a trail for business education in Hong Kong and Asia since 1963, cultivating high-achieving gra-

duates who steer and shape the global business landscape” shows the international influence of the graduates. The phrase “international best practice (HSUHK)” also shows that school education is in line with international standards. According to *Ayoubi and Massoud (2007)*, various areas of international collaboration are outlined in these sentences and phrases, such as teaching programs, partnerships, and student and staff exchanges. In the current globalized market, internationalization has become a good strategy enhancing market reputation (*Mazzarol, 1998*). This is because it allows students to acquire professional knowledge and cross-cultural experience simultaneously (*Brown, 1997*). Due to its history of being colonized, Hong Kong is a contact zone where traditional Chinese culture and Western culture meet, clash, and grapple with each other (*Pratt, 1991*). Today, Hong Kong is positioned as an international city facing the world, with diverse cultures and extensive international exchanges. Therefore, the colleges in Hong Kong can provide their students with educational opportunities that are in line with global standards. The “international” and “global” education concepts and internship opportunities in the prospectus are the unique strengths of universities located in Hong Kong and they are also features to attract applicants.

7. Conclusion

Promotional culture has brought profound changes to various aspects of society, including higher education. As colleges pick out students from the pool of candidates, students are also choosing their ideal schools. In order to be more competitive in this process, universities have to promote themselves to win potential students. This paper explores the influence of promotional culture on discourse practice of higher education by analyzing the undergraduate admissions prospectuses of the business schools at HKU, CUHK, HKUST, HKSYU, and HSUHK. In terms of the use of personal pronouns, the prospectuses use “we” and “you” to build a closer relationship between the schools and potential students. In addition, the syntactic features of the prospectuses also have a generic intertextuality with advertising discourse. The use of short sentences and phrases in the prospectuses allows readers to quickly get more important information about the school. The combination of images texts and colors can also help schools better advertise their programs. Hong Kong’s historical background and geographical location also make its culture unique. This puts Hong Kong at the forefront of the world in intercultural communication and also makes “international” and “global” education become one of the major advantages of education in Hong Kong. Through analysis, the paper finds that the promotional culture permeates the admissions prospectuses of the universities in Hong Kong. College programs are promoting themselves through their prospectuses.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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