

Visual Metadiscourse Analysis on the Malaysian Universities' Digital Promotional Materials

Nor Atifah Mohamad*, Nur Hidayatulshima Omar, Nazarul Azali Razali, Mohd Khairulfaidz Shamsudin

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Melaka, Alor Gajah, Melaka, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Studies in the use of textual metadiscourse in the academic context have been explored extensively but not for the visual elements. Hence, this study extends Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse framework to the visual mode, examining how interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers are realized in the Malaysian public and private universities' digital promotional materials. Utilising mixed-method approach, this study examined the frequency distribution of the visual metadiscourse in the digital promotional materials across university types and this is followed by and a more detailed analysis of the visual elements. The findings reveal that Malaysian private universities employed more visual metadiscourse in their digital promotional materials compared to the Malaysian public universities. Interactional metadiscourse was also found to highly used than the interactive metadiscourse for both university types that suggests a disproportionate preference of the universities in engaging with the prospective students instead of enhancing the organizational elements of the text. By highlighting the strategic deployment of visual metadiscourse, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how institutions construct their visual preference, credibility, and identity in their digital promotional materials from persuasion perspective. Thus, this study suggests the university content designer's, marketing and admission departments not to disregard the visual metadiscourse in their promotional communication.

Keywords: Malaysian public universities, Malaysian private universities, visual metadiscourse; Persuasion

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, high internet penetration and speed have significantly transformed the promotional strategies employed by higher education institutions (HEIs). Due to the digitalization process and easy accessibility of information have created a highly competitive marketization practices, prompting universities to adopt more sophisticated marketing practices. Various marketization efforts have been done by the local public and private universities to attract prospective students' enrolment, such as education fairs, campus tours, and exhibits to help prospective students gain insights on the academic programmes, resources, and values the universities present. However, these approaches have proven less effective in securing student enrolments in today's marketised higher education landscape (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2010). Conversely, de Run and Renganathan, (2013) found that mass media advertising is the primary source for prospective students to select the university. This is further supported by Almadhoun, Dominic, and Woon (2011) and Shahid, Alvi, and Jahan (2023), explain that prospective students peruse the universities' promotional materials, such as the university's online prospectus, to establish a relationship with the institution.

In the Malaysian context, the stakes of HEIs are particularly high. As an upper middle-income economy, Malaysia intends to have a high-income economy and become a developed country by 2030. To achieve this status, Malaysia needs to achieve a Gross National Income of US\$12,535, as the World Trade Organization outlined. However, as an upper middle-income economy country, Malaysia still lacks US\$1.335 from the

desired high-income status (The World Bank, 2021). In order to achieve this, human capital plays a pivotal role in generating the country's income. Ergo, utilising high-skilled labour can help boost the country's productivity by ensuring better wages, leading to better economic growth. However, only 30% of Malaysia's human capital is considered high-skilled labour, which is below the standard outlined by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of 40% (Lee, 2023), which is still among the concerns of the nation. Thus, to support this narrative, the country's education providers, especially the Malaysian public and private higher education institutions, must play their part in transforming Malaysia into a developed country.

Promoting prospective students to continue their education requires the HEIs to promote their undergraduate and postgraduate academic programmes. Thus, in this promotional spectrum, promotional efforts through digital platforms to publicise their services to prospective students must be aptly made to ensure the success of producing continuous learners. In hindsight, traditional promotional tactics employed by the HEIs used offline platforms, which included radio, television, and billboard advertisements. However, these platforms were no longer effective in securing the prospective students. Currently, with the gradual change to online materials such as universities' websites social media platforms and, digital promotional materials such as digital brochures, guidebooks and prospectuses as these are more relevant to be used in the current competitive marketisation of higher education institutions segment (Newman, Couturier, Scurry, 2010).

Pertaining to university student admission, Breen (2003) attests that prospective students will consider the information presented in the university's prospectus when they are deciding on the university of their choice. The printed prospectus is typically given to the prospective students, and the same prospectus is also made available online in the university website to serve as the prospective students point of reference. In addition to that, the information needed by the prospective students concerning applying for the academic programmes at the institutions is specifically presented in the universities' prospectuses (Mogaji & Yoon, 2019). Typically found on the university's website, among other landing web pages, the digital prospectuses are a staple promotional material for any institution to entice prospective students to continue their education (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). On this pretext, potential students seeking information about university admission only search for the university's prospectus, brochures or pamphlets, as these materials manifest similar yet concise information about the university (Bano & Shakir, 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to expand the scope of metadiscourse research by examining the use of visual metadiscourse in Malaysian public and private universities' digital promotional materials. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- a) What are the visual metadiscourse elements used in Malaysian public and private universities' digital promotional materials?
- b) What persuasive functions are served by the visual metadiscourse elements in these materials?

Persuasion and visual metadiscourse

In the study of promotional discourse, the use of visual elements other than linguistic devices should be investigated as these elements complement one another. These multimodal artefacts contribute to the meaning-making process (Kumpf, 2000) and help in understanding the content and the flow of the information (D'Angelo, 2016). Previously, visual communication in multimodal artefacts has been researched in the field of semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), and studies on visual metadiscourse have yet to receive attention from researchers.

Kress (2009) declares that with the increment of visuals accompanying the text, a thorough understanding of written communication can only be achieved if all modes (i.e. textual and visual modes) are taken into consideration. Moreover, understanding the visual metadiscourse is important to the meaning-making process of the text and influences the readers' opinion (Machin, 2016). Falah (2005) also concurs with this notion and reveals that images may have a longer effect on the readers' minds.

On another note, metadiscourse is used to achieve persuasion. Hyland (1998) states that the main objective of textual metadiscourse is *"to help form a convincing and coherent text by relating individual propositions to*

each other and to other texts” (p. 442). However, for visual metadiscourse, it helps to enhance the textual element as it enables the text to appear more substantial and succinct to enable a relationship with the readers (Gardner & Luchtenberg, 2000). Thus, visual metadiscourse contributes largely to persuasion as it helps to portray the overall representation of a text and readers’ engagement. This is analogous to Aristotle’s rhetoric of ethos (character of the writer), pathos (emotions), and logos (logic and rationality). Hence, this study will try to widen the scope of metadiscourse by analysing visual metadiscourse elements and the persuasive functions that these elements serve in Malaysian public and private universities’ digital promotional materials.

Data and Analysis

Data collection

For this study, 2 corpora derived from eighteen Malaysian public and private universities’ digital promotional materials were created which are the Malaysian public universities corpus and the Malaysian private universities corpus. The corpora were created through following steps: the initial step includes internet search through the query “university name + prospectus / brochure / guide / pamphlet”. Subsequently, the documents found were examined and only those that meet the following criteria were included in the corpus: (1) the prospectus is written in English and is readily available in the university’s website; (2) it must be in booklet form and multimodal in nature; (3) the material must be available online in tandem with the Malaysian higher education expo (*Jom Masuk U*); (4) the promotional material must display the university’s persuasive effort as an institution and not for specific faculty or academic centers; (5) the promotional booklet must present several sub-headings such as cover page, reasons to study in Malaysia or the university, facts and figures about the university, testimonies, facilities and services offered by the university. based on these criteria, 10 digital promotional materials from Malaysian public universities and 8 from Malaysian private universities were chosen. Each promotional material was saved in ATLAS.ti database in PDF format for further analysis.

Data analysis

The next step is to annotate the visual images in the visual corpora. The visual annotation process is based on the grammar of visual design postulated by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), and De Groot et al.’s (2016) visual metadiscourse model and the metadiscourse model proposed by Hyland (2005). Since visual elements play a complementary function in a multimodal text, all sharp, detailed, and clear visuals displayed in the digital promotional materials were taken into account.

Initially, the authors drew on the interactive and interactional categories of metadiscourse as a point of reference to identify the visual organization elements and readers’ engagement elements. This is then followed by the identification of subcategories for both interactive and interactional dimensions. Subsequently, the identification is done based on visual grammar and visual metadiscourse model to ascertain the visual resources in fulfilling its metadiscursive functions. At this stage, a meticulous observation and consideration were given to ascertain the metadiscourse function plays by each visual from the context of Malaysian university. For example, there are 4 ways to identify self-mentions that include university logos, internal stake holder, university colours and hues. These observed visual codes were then cross-checked for their suitability in other metadiscourse category, in this case, the frame markers. This process of scrutiny was applied to all visual resources across all visual metadiscourse categories. Table 1 shows the categorization of visual metadiscourse used in the corpora.

Table 1. The categorization of visual metadiscourse in the corpora

Visual category	Functions	Examples
Interactive category		
Transition Marker	Portray the narrative elements / stages / flow of the propositional elements	Geographical, circumstantial chronological visuals
Code Glosses	Shows the examples of the proposition brought by the addresser and reframe the proposition in the visual format	Graphic elements, framing, product or services offered by the addresser

Frame Markers	Highlight distinctive narrative / stages / flow / boundary in the visual elements	Visuals that frame the stages / products / services
Evidentials	Visual display that refers to external source	Visuals on awards / certification / accreditation received / related from external party
Endophoric Markers	Visual display that refers to internal source	Visuals on social media logo / QR / that depict the addressee's information
Interactional category		
Attitude Markers	Visual representations of the mood and personality of the addresser	Layout, internal / external stakeholders, facial expressions, eye contact, kinesics, attires
Self-Mentions	Illustrate visuals that are related to the addresser (first person pronoun)	Institutional / organizational colours, logos, internal and external stakeholders
Engagement Markers	Exhibit visuals that are shot from readers' point of view	Eye contact, eye level images, angles of shots
Boosters	Demonstrate noticeable and distinctive design elements	Typography, colour juxtaposition, shots, picture size
Hedges	Display nonchalant visuals towards the proposition	Vague, partial, blurred or diluted visuals

Visual metadiscourse aims to organize the flow of information in the text and this is achieved through transition marker, code glosses, frame marker, evidentials and endophoric markers. For transition markers, it is function to portray the narrative elements or different stages or flow that relates with the propositional content. This is brought through the geographical, circumstantial and chronological visuals. Based on the corpora, this includes the transition or change that is experienced by the students during and after their studies at the university. As for code glosses, it offers additional information or exemplifications by showing examples of the university's services and reformulation through graphic elements and frame markers clearly labels the images according to academic journey stages such as the while and post-study or the images of the university's products or services. Evidentials depicts the evidence from external sources, such as images of the university's academic accolade and related certification/accreditation and for the final element of endophoric markers, it provides images or logos that indicate the location that came from the internal source (from the university itself).

As for the interactional category, it is used to engage with the audience and thus creating a more interactive relationship with the reader. For attitude markers, it represents the university's mood and personality through the participants facial expressions, eye contact and kinesics. However, for university's personality, it is shown through their students, lecturers, students and alumni' attires. Self-mentions is presented from the personal pronoun's perspectives and images or colour that directly relate to the university. Engagement markers is depicted by the images taken from the readers' perspective such as images that were shot from the back angle of the readers or eye level perspective. Boosters reinforces the textual repeating or presenting the typography, colours, shots and the picture size in appealing manner. Finally, hedges illustrates uncertainty and imprecision through the use of less salient or partial images, among a few.

These coded images were annotated in the ATLAS.ti software for each visual occurrence in the digital promotional document. Each visual metadiscourse occurrence on each page were counted once but may play more than 1 metadiscursive function. Thus, upon completion of the independent annotation, a brief descriptive statistic was conducted to understand the frequency of occurrence for each metadiscourse category.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

All of the images and graphic designs used in all digital promotional materials were recorded and sorted according to their distinctive functions. Overall, there were a slight difference in the occurrences of visual metadiscourse used in the corpora. Table 2 illustrates the demographic data of visual metadiscourse in Malaysian public and private universities' corpora.

Table 2. Demographic Data of Visual Metadiscourse in Malaysian Public and Private Universities.

University	University (n)	Occurrences (n)	Average
Public	10	8,419	841.9
Private	8	8,266	1,033.25
Total	18	16,685	937.58

Malaysian public universities recorded 8,419 occurrences of visual metadiscourse, and the private counterparts noted a slightly lower occurrence with 8,266. However, considering the different number of study samples involved in this study, it is only relevant to understand the usage of visual metadiscourse through mean scores. With a total of ten universities, Malaysian public universities just accumulated an average of 841.9, whereas private universities, with just eight universities, recorded an astonishing average of 1,033.25. This indicates a striking difference in the frequency of use of visual metadiscourse in both corpora. The following table presents the frequency distribution of interactive metadiscourse in the Malaysian public and private universities' visual corpora.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Interactive Metadiscourse in Malaysian Public and Private Universities' Visual Corpora

Visual Category	Public Universities (5,881 occurrences)	Mean	Private Universities (5,823 occurrences)	Mean
Interactive	1,656	165.2	1,466	183.3
Transition Markers	1,231	123.1	1,273	159.1
Code Glosses	168	16.8	316	39.5
Frame Markers	57	5.7	127	15.9
Evidentials Endophoric Markers	34	3.4	35	4.4
TOTAL	3,146	314.6	3,217	402.2

Table 3 depicts the number of occurrences for interactive metadiscourse in both corpora. The analysis shows that Malaysian private universities used a slightly higher amount of this marker with 3,217 occurrences compared to 3,146 occurrences by Malaysian public universities. This pattern was also translated into the mean scores in which the private universities recorded a higher mean score of 402.2 than the public universities which accumulated 314.6.

As for the raw frequency of interactive metadiscourse sub-markers in the Malaysian public and private universities' visual corpora, the result was analogous in both corpora. As depicted in the table above, Transition Markers recorded the highest occurrences for Malaysian public universities' visual corpus with 1,656 occurrences (M=165.6) and the private universities also produced the same pattern in which Transition Markers tops the chart with 1,466 occurrences (M=183.3). This is followed by Code Glosses which also recorded a high occurrence of 1,231 times (M=123.1) in the public universities and 1,273 occurrences (M=159.1) for the private. It is worth noting that both of these subcategories recorded a high percentage of 91.77% for the public universities and 85.14% for private universities.

The final three markers recorded significantly low numbers which were Frame Markers with 168 (M=16.8), Evidentials with 57 (M=5.7) and Endophoric Markers with 34 (M=3.4) for the public universities. Comparatively, Malaysian private universities noted 316 occurrences (M=39.5) for Frame Markers, 127 occurrences (M=15.9) for Evidentials and 35 occurrences (M=4.4) for Endophoric Markers respectively. These sub-markers only constitute 8.2% and 14.8% for MPBU and MPRU corpora respectively. Table 5 depicts the interactional metadiscourse frequency distribution in more detail.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Interactional Metadiscourse in Malaysian Public and Private Universities' Visual Corpora

Visual Category	Public Universities (5,467 occurrences)	Mean	Private Universities (5,170 occurrences)	Mean
Interactional				
Attitude Markers	2,286	228.6	2,093	261.6
Boosters	1,981	198.1	2,037	254.6
Self-Mentions	557	55.7	618	77.3
Engagement markers	333	33.3	270	33.8
Hedges	116	11.6	31	3.9
TOTAL	5,273	527.3	5,049	646.3

Similar to interactive metadiscourse, there is a similar frequency distribution in the Malaysian public and private universities' digital promotional materials. Attitude Markers produced the highest occurrences in the public universities' visual corpus with 2,286 occurrences ($M=228.6$) and this is followed by Boosters with 1,981 occurrences ($M=198.1$). Self-Mentions was the third highly used with 557 occurrences ($M=55.7$) and this is followed by Engagement Markers with 333 occurrences ($M=33.3$). The least used interactional metadiscourse was Hedges with 116 occurrences ($M=11.6$).

Attitude Markers was also marked the highest use of interactional metadiscourse in the Malaysian private universities' corpus. With 2,093 occurrences ($M=261.6$), this noted a higher usage compared to its public universities counterpart. Boosters was also the second most used in the private universities' visual corpus with 2,037 occurrences ($M=254.6$) and subsequently Self-Mentions with 618 occurrences ($M=77.3$). Engagement Markers followed suit with 270 occurrences ($M=33.8$), and the least occurred interactional metadiscourse was Hedges with 31 ($M=3.9$).

Principally, Malaysian private universities used a higher number of interactive and interactional visual metadiscourse in their digital promotional materials than the public universities. Although the number of Malaysian private universities' digital promotional materials selected for this study was lower than the public universities, 60% of the private universities' visual metadiscourse' raw frequencies and the mean scores were higher. Hence, these findings suggest that Malaysian private universities were more aggressive in portraying their visual persuasion compared to the public universities, which showed a more relaxed visual representation in their digital promotional materials.

Transition Markers in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

Transition Markers noted the highest usage for the interactive category. Used to express the semantic relationship or the narrative representations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005) of the digital promotional materials, these markers dominated the visual elements in both corpora. For this study, the directional flow that marks the onset of becoming a university student to reaping the benefits of finishing their studies was noticeable throughout the digital promotional materials. two sub-elements for this narrative representation were classed which were a) while-studying and b) post-study.

While-studying refers to images that are associated with the participants, processes and settings involved during the academic journey. As for post-study, images of participants, processes and settings associated with finishing the study were analysed. Hence, alumni representations, convocation, parents and activities together with accreditation and certification received by the university alumni were tabulated for this study. Figure 1 shows the visual Transition Markers in this study.



Figure 1. Samples of visual Transition Markers used in the Malaysian public and private corpora

Figure 1 shows the transition from while studying stage to the post study. These Transition Markers signal display specific images and academic values brought by the institutions such as the international networks established by the university and also its grand facility. This is later juxtaposed with the end stage of studies that illustrates the students' happiness of receiving their academic scroll and the accreditation that comes with it. Thus, displaying the narrative from start to finish enables the prospective students to know the complete academic cycle of a university student and it serves as a persuasive strategy to capture the prospective students' understanding and interest towards the university.

Code Glosses in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

Code Glosses recorded the second-highest usage for interactive category. This category functions to help readers to understand the ideational meaning brought by digital promotional materials (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005). For this study, 4 elements have emerged for this category namely graphic elements, university facilities, framing, and student activities. Figure 2 shows the examples of Code Glosses evident in the study.

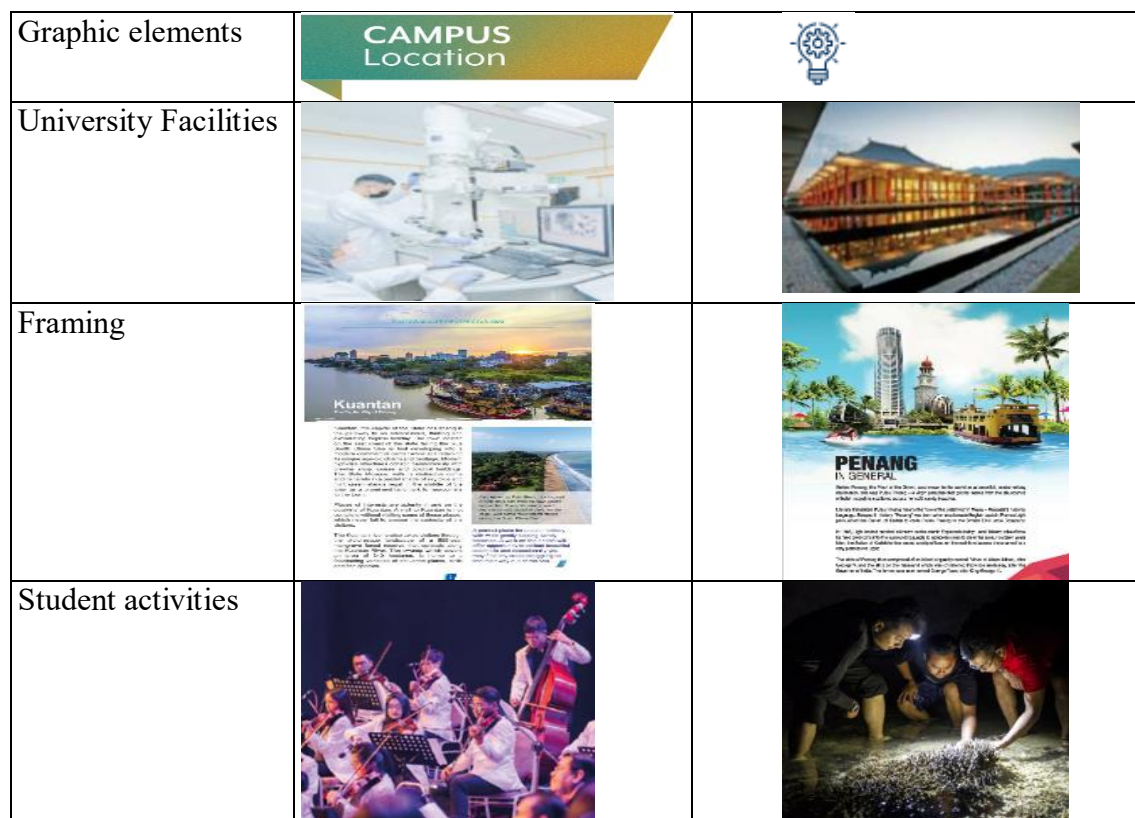


Figure 2. Examples of Code Glosses used by the Malaysian public and private universities

As shown in Figure 2, both types of universities used various Code Glosses in their digital promotional materials. For graphic elements, they operate as any form of visual that clarify and exemplify the meaning of

textual reference. Thus, the use of graphic elements such as labels and icons in the corpora render abstract or general concept to more concrete. In this case, these elements were used not only to compartmentalise the content but also to highlight and reiterate the information that is presented in the digital promotional material.

Similarly for university facilities, tangible images that depict, arranged and framed according to the context of university facilities were chosen as they reiterate the proposition brought by the textual element in the digital promotional materials. Based on the corpora, modern academic facilities were not only shown interior-wise such as state-of-the-art equipment owned by the university, but also with the image of traditional buildings as part of the universities' academic facilities. By showing the modern and traditional university facilities, the universities were able to expand their visual persuasion to prospective students who may have different insight of the university. Alternatively, this will also help to enhance or alter the prospective students' impression about the institution.

There were several types of framing used by the universities in their digital promotional materials. Separated framing was shown through the use of gutters or sectional divisions to separate the images of the scenery from the textual elements. However, the gutters were placed close enough to express a sense of information continuity to facilitate the discursive function of visual and textual elements on that page. On that note, connected framing was also evident by merging the university location with interesting facilities, recreational activities and its natural beauty on the same page. This is to enable the readers to connect the geographical location of the university with its natural beauty and interesting activities that can be done and further influence the readers' opinions.

Finally, depiction of student activities function by visually enacting abstract pedagogical concepts. Extracurricular activities such as performing in an orchestra and doing field work propose and solidify the idea of the universities' capabilities to offer and conduct non-traditional and current ways of learning. Thus, through these images, readers can imply that these universities also offer and conduct non-traditional and innovative ways of learning.

Frame markers in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

Frame Markers constitutes the third-highest usage in the Malaysian universities' corpora. This category helps the readers to understand the flow of studies or the discourse acts depicted in the digital promotional materials (De Groot et al., 2016). For this study, 3 elements were evident to mark the visual sequence which are while-studying, post studying and graphic elements. Figure 3 illustrates the examples of Frame Markers in the study.

While studying		
Post studying		
Graphic elements		

Figure 3. Examples of Frame Markers used by the Malaysian public and private universities

Based on Figure 3, the visuals deployed were used to structure and guide the interpretation of information across different stages of students' experience. The explicit frame markers, while studying, post studying and graphic elements segment the narrative into temporal and thematic stages. The arrangement from "while studying" to "post studying" reflects the chronological sequence that may be experienced by the readers should they enroll into the university. Other than that, the linear progression from academic engagement to professional achievement was also apparent. Meanwhile, "graphic elements" that fall under this category include the lines used in the digital promotional materials. These lines signal discourse shift from global to local geographic positioning as a marker of credibility. Additionally, it is used to align the text and visual in rows and further demarcate the textual elements. Thus, this will help to create a more structured interpretation of the university's narrative.

Evidentials in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

In Hyland's (2005) model, Evidentials refer to references to external or outside information, such as other studies, data or expert opinion to show the writer's credibility. In this study, Evidentials appear through the images of accreditation body, awards and certification as shown by Figure 4.

Accreditation body	
Awards	
Certification	

Figure 4. Examples of Evidentials used by the Malaysian public and private universities

Among the common Evidential images to support the writer's credibility is by referencing authoritative accreditation body. Validation from Times Higher Education (THE) World University Ranking logo functions as external citation and this serves as authoritative endorsement. Correspondingly, the image of award serves as visual proof of achievement and marks the university as externally validated and distinguished. The certification logos from SIRIM and UKAS together with ISO reference provides another layer of evidentiality by including evidence of quality assurance frameworks. Overall, these external citations offer verifiable evidence of credibility and quality compliance and thereby enhancing the universities' fundamental values and their legitimacy.

Endophoric Markers in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

In visual metadiscourse, Endophoric Markers is defined as the images that refer to the other parts of the same text. This is to help the readers to navigate their reading process by guiding them to supporting details,

clarifications or other related information. There are 3 types of Endophoric Markers found in this study which include social media logo, QR code and signature as presented in Figure 5.

Social media logo	
QR Code	
Signatures	 Leigh Kamoline, Head of Evaluation 18 Oct 2021

Figure 5. Examples of Endophoric Markers used by the Malaysian public and private universities

As for social media logo, it signposts and tells the readers of the exact visual element. In this case, the readers are clearly presented with TikTok logo to create an unambiguous link between the linguistic and non-linguistic data on the same page. In a similar manner, QR code offers immediate navigation to the additional institutional information that is prepared in the extended version. Finally, signatures are used to refer to authority within the same discourse. In this study, the signature is used to refer to the authorial source of the institutional message. Collectively, these elements may persuade the readers by displaying coherent and connected communication and reinforce the universities' credibility.

Attitude Markers in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

Attitude Markers noted the highest usage in the interactional metadiscourse category. These markers shaped how the readers feel towards the author and shown through possessive attributes of the author through evaluative, affective or other symbolic values (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021). Figure 6 illustrates the examples of Attitude Markers found in this study.

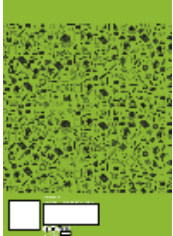
Members of the university		
Typography		
Layout		
Awards received		

Figure 6. Examples of Attitude Markers used by the Malaysian public and private universities

Several types of university-related members were identified, including students and top management, lecturers and alumni. These members were chosen to communicate community, inclusivity and academic engagement. The members' representations were examined in terms of their facial expressions, eye contact, kinesics and attire presented in the digital promotional materials. Based on Figure 6, members of the university show approachability, youthfulness and happiness through the portrayal of student but also convey the attitude of competence, gravitas and institutional authority through the image of the university's vice chancellor. This deliberate juxtaposition is the universities' persuasive strategy of fostering a vibrant student life while maintaining a high standard of professionalism.

The other element is shown through the use of typography. This element articulates specific attitude of the author and amplifies the universities' claims. Consequently, this will instill a sense of unquestionable credibility and academic prestige. This study has found the use of bold and a dynamic and free flowing font. Bold fonts were used to stress the propositional content of the sentence, and the creative fonts were used to project unconventional thinking and innovative nature of the university. These elements were used in tandem to create a sense of prestige and dynamism which may appeal to the readers. As for layout, several stark differences were also noted in this study. Icon-based layout on the green background suggests creativity and unconventional approach of the university towards their learning process and the community whereas the other digital promotional material used business-oriented layout that may be perceived as aspirational goals or career-readiness by the readers.

Finally, are the images of the awards received by the universities. The "Diamond Status" award represents the outstanding services or quality offered by the universities. The same can be said to the staged trophies that convey an attitude of pride and commitment of excellence. These elements work simultaneously in order to build a compelling and persuasive narrative for the readers.

Boosters in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

Hyland (2005) describes Boosters as resources that express certainty and emphasize certainty to the claim. In this study, 4 categories of Boosters were found that include colour juxtaposition, angle shots, university related logos and picture size. Figure 7 shows the examples of Boosters found in this study.

Colour juxtaposition		
Eye level and low angle shots		
University-related logos		
Picture size		

Figure 7. Examples of Boosters used by the Malaysian public and private universities

In visual metadiscourse, colour juxtaposition functions by drawing sharp contrasts that intensify the meaning of the images. The vibrant and contradicting font colours commonly associate the sense of urgency and importance that consequently make these messages stand out more and project more significance. As for the angle shots, images from the low angle create a larger more imposing and authoritative sense to the readers. Thus, these 2 elements create a sense of prestige and importance that may influence the readers' opinion of the university.

Using an external logos from prestigious organization shows that the university is endorsed and respected globally as it shows the universities fulfilling not only their academic but also their social responsibility. Likewise, picture size magnifies the images that are deemed significant and important. This signals the universities' confidence and shows the universities' priorities to the readers. Generally, these elements also elevate the universities' authority and pride and thereby leave no room for the readers to doubt the institution.

Self-Mentions in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

Another element in the interactional metadiscourse category is the Self-Mentions. It explicitly refer to the presence of the author, reader, or any individuals that have direct relationship with the university. In this study, this was made visible through the depiction of university mascot, university colours, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person visual pronouns as illustrated in Figure 8.

University mascot	
Hue colours	
1 st person pronouns	
2 nd person pronouns	
3 rd person pronouns	

Figure 8. Examples of Self-Mentions used by the Malaysian public and private universities

University mascot serves as the symbolic self-reference that embody the universities' persona. Similarly, the adoption of the university colours in the digital promotional materials acts as metonym for the universities themselves. This is also to mark an unmistakable presence of the university in digital promotional materials.

The representation of the university was shown through the image of the university's vice chancellor (1st person pronouns). The top management use the function of "we" and act as an agent that speaks from the universities' behalf. The inclusion of students (2nd person pronouns) reflects the universities' communication with the reader and take the verbal function of "you" to directly engage with the readers. As for the 3rd person pronouns, the universities assume the role of "they" that signals the universities as an observer and catalysts for the students' success. Inarguably, these collective visual elements blatantly exert the universities' presence, and identity and help to reinforce and strengthen their engagement with the readers.

It is important to note that Self-mentions displays the universities as the authorial voice in the digital promotional materials. Each element such as mascot, colours and representations of top management, students, and parents serve the self-referential function, and this function focuses on the images that reflect the university as the subject of the images. However, Attitude Markers depicts the author's evaluation to guide the readers to reach the desired opinions and require the readers to form their own judgement of the Attitude Markers' images. Nevertheless, these analytically distinct elements still need to work in tandem to ensure a persuasive and engaging impact of visual metadiscourse is achieved.

Engagement Markers in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

Among the least used interactional category is the Engagement Markers. These markers were used to actively involve the readers by directly engaging or inviting them to a mutual understanding. This acts as a dynamic form of interaction between the universities and the readers and produces a more interactive communication. In this study, 2 elements fall under this category which were angles of shots and eye contact.

Angles of shots		
Eye contact		

Figure 9. Examples of Engagement Markers used by the Malaysian public and private universities

Figure 9 shows the examples of Engagement Markers that share similar elements with Attitude Markers and Boosters. However, Engagement Markers directly engage with the readers and invite them to participate or align with the universities' proposition. Attitude Markers did not address the readers directly and Boosters is used to project intensity and assertiveness. In essence, Engagement Markers used shot angles and eye contact to strategically position the readers in the communicative context. Angles of shots determine the power dynamics of the author, either to appear approachable or vulnerable and eye contact provides a sense of connection between the author and the reader. So, positioning the reader in the preferred frame will reduce the distance between the author and the reader and inadvertently persuade the readers to the desired opinion.

Hedges in the Malaysian public and private universities corpora

The lease used interactional element is Hedges. Used as an element to express a degree of uncertainty, makes the Hedges more open to interpretation. There are several elements that fall under this category which include

less salient images, patterned background, outline, and partial images. Figure 10 shows the example of Hedges found in this study.

Less salient images	
Patterned background	
Outline	
Partial Images	

Figure 10. Examples of Hedges used by the Malaysian public and private universities

Less salient image and patterned background were used to indicate Hedges. The intentional blurred or faded images show a non-definitive element of reality and leave less specific impression towards the readers. The patterned background consists of subtle lines, shapes and non-solid colours suggest a simple statement and devoid of any nuanced or more complex interpretation of the images. Due to these less salient images, they produce a less absolute picture of reality and were not persuasive in nature and thus not customarily used.

Outline and partial images lead to open interpretation as the images blend the images of existing buildings with a conceptual plan and also show only a portion of the building structure. These suggest that these elements were a part of a bigger picture, and this leads the readers to produce various interpretations. Hence, these simplified images did not offer a concrete persuasion and consequently was not a preferred element to be employed by the author of the digital promotional materials.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that a higher amount of interactional metadiscourse was used than the interactive metadiscourse. This is in line with De Groot et al.'s (2016), who also reported similar result. Highlighting the universities' subjective persona and its role in prospective students' academic journey, interactional metadiscourse presents conflicting visual elements to deliver their intention. Approachable but authoritative persona was displayed through the use of Attitude Markers, maximum certainty of prestige and excellence was conveyed through Boosters but still use a minimum number of Hedges to mitigate the force for certain claims were among the notable findings for this study. The implementation of these persuasive strategies reflects the universities' sophisticated attempt to strike a balance between making bold claims with a sense of humility and acknowledging the institution's complex and multifaceted nature.

Concurrently, the interactive metadiscourse is used to guide the prospective students' understanding of the universities' digital promotional materials. This persuasive narrative employs Transition Markers the most to guide the prospective students of the imagined academic journey. Code Glosses visualise the universities' abstract values and Endophoric Markers offers a more extensive connectivity between the prospective readers with the universities. Thus, each interactive metadiscourse elements play a strategic function in the competitive higher education student admission landscape to persuade the prospective students to enrol into the university.

In sum, the synergy between interactive and interactional markers allows the university to effectively control the flow of information, shape its public identity, and cultivate a persuasive relationship with its audience. This analysis underscores the importance of a comprehensive visual metadiscourse in persuasive communication in order to navigate the competitive landscape of university admission. While the current study has explored the use of visual metadiscourse in the Malaysian public and private universities' digital promotional materials, future research could explore how these visual metadiscourse strategies vary across different cultural contexts and media platforms to extend these insights.

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