

Viewing the Top Philippine Universities Through the Photographs on their Official Websites

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Abstract: Using photographs gathered from the main and secondary pages of the websites of the top four higher educational institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines, this paper analyzed how these universities visually represent themselves. The researchers used denotative reading, visual framing, and connotative reading on the photographs to determine how each of these four Philippine HEIs represented their self-images in contradistinction with each other in terms of their teaching, research, extension, internationalization, campus and facilities, and student life, as well as their overall positioning. The photographs show that the University of the Philippines highlights its role as a resource for individuals that are dedicated to the welfare of the nation; Ateneo de Manila defines its education as being able to embrace a commitment to develop its students as global citizens equipped with the right skills, attitudes, and perspectives; De La Salle University underscore a Lasallian education that provides transformative experiences that are innovative and holistic; and University of Santo Tomas positions itself as a site of history, culture, and tradition.

Keywords: Philippine Higher Educational Institutions; Institutional Websites; Self Presentation; Denotative Reading; Visual Framing Analysis; Connotative Reading

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to understand how the top four Philippine HEIs visually represent themselves in their official websites, more specifically on how they negotiated their identity building in relation to and in contrast with each other in terms of their teaching, research, extension, internationalization, campus and facilities, and student life, as well as their overall positioning.

To do this, images were gathered from the home and secondary pages of the websites of the Philippines' top four higher educational institutions (HEIs) and examined using semiotic analysis. The university rankings used is based on the Quacquarelli Symonds Asian University Rankings, which for the past several years, have consistently identified the University of the Philippines System (UPS), together with Ateneo De Manila University (ADMU), De La Salle University (DLSU), and University of Santo Tomas (UST) as the top four Philippine HEIs. UPS is composed of eight autonomous units with the University of the Philippines Diliman (UPD) as its flagship unit.

Thus, to more or less balance the sizes, structure, and the comprehensive nature of the four subject Philippine HEIs, UPD was selected, instead of UPS, as one of the subject institutions of this paper. The four subject Philippine HEIs of this paper are, therefore, UPD, ADMU, DLSU, and UST.

The semiotic technique used by this paper is based on the schematization done by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) involving four levels of visual analyses, namely the studies of visuals as: 1) denotative systems, 2) stylistic-semiotic systems, 3) connotative systems, and 4) ideological representations. This paper primarily relied on the first three levels of semiotics in order to understand how each of these four Philippine HEIs represented themselves and positioned themselves in relation with the other top Philippine HEIs. The results for Level 4 or what are the ideological representations found in these photographs are discussed in another research paper authored by the same research group.

The sparse literature on websites of HEIs outside of the Philippine context reveals that a four-level semiotic study on photographs gathered from

the websites of a cluster of HEIs is a topic that is yet unexplored. Although Drori, Delmestri, and Oberg's (2015) project closely resembles this current paper their project stopped at the third level visual analyses and worked on logos, emblems, and seals, instead of photographs. Furthermore, although Shahjahan, Estera, Bae, and Sonneveldt's (2020) paper indeed focused on photographs of Asian HEIs, these photographs were not gathered from the websites of such HEIs but from two international university ranking organizations. Strictly speaking, Shahjahan, Estera, Bae, and Sonneveldt's (2020) study was not about self presentation of selected HEIs. Furthermore, although Zhang and O'Halloran (2013), and Vasquez, Sergi, and Cordelier's (2013) works were on self-representation of some HEIs, these were single case studies, unlike the cluster of case studies undertaken by this paper. The authors of this paper deem it justifiable not to heed the theoretical call of Lažetić's (2020) to veer away from focusing on institutional identities and self positioning of HEIs in the websites in the sense that this current paper is a pioneering work on the study of Philippine HEI websites in particular and even of Philippine corporate websites in general.

The goal of this study is to examine closely the representation in the institutions' webpages in the growing visualisation, spatialisation, mediatisation, and branding of the top four Philippine HEIs. This will also highlight the role of images in constructing the desires or aspirations of students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders with the hope of attracting new consumers and retaining the existing ones. Results of the study will be highly significant to HEIs stakeholders in particular in the sense that these will: illuminate how campus imagery reproduces particular imagined communities and imagined selves within the context of Philippine higher education; underscore the importance of critical media literacy among them – students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders of Philippine HEIs' websites; and lead them in creating a social imaginary guided by the idea that imagination is a social practice constructing imagined worlds and imagined selves leading towards acceptance and belonging of Philippine higher education through visualisation of the top four Philippine HEIs.

2. METHODOLOGY

The subject Philippine HEIs of this paper are UPD, ADMU, DLSU, and UST. UPD is located in the Diliman area of Quezon City, Metro Manila. As the flagship unit of UPS, it traces its history back to the founding of UPS in 1908 by the American colonial government. UPD was established in 1939, when

UPS decided to set up a new campus in Quezon City. In 2008, the whole UPS was declared as the national research university of the Philippines. Presently, UPD has a little over 1,500 academic staff and almost 25,000 students. ADMU is located in Quezon City, Metro Manila. It was founded in 1859 by Spanish Jesuit priests at the old walled city of Manila. Presently, ADMU has a little over 1,000 academic staff and almost 11,000 students. Although ADMU is producing a significant volume of research output, it did not officially declare itself to be a research university. DLSU is located in Manila. It was founded by Irish-American Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1911. In 2011 DLSU declared itself to be a research university. Presently, DLSU has about 800 academic staff and 12,000 students. UST was founded by Spanish Dominican priests in 1611 in the old walled city of Manila. Presently, UST has almost 2,000 academic staff at almost 30,000 students. Although UST is also producing a significant volume of research output, it also did not officially declare itself to be a research university. All of these four subject Philippine HEIs are comprehensive universities. One of these is owned by the state, while three are owned by religious orders. Although all of these four subject Philippine HEIs are producing significant volumes of research output, only two are officially known to be research universities.

To gather data, the authors of this paper visited the official websites of these four top Philippine HEIs (<https://upd.edu.ph/>, <https://ateneo.edu/>, <https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/>, and <http://ust.edu.ph/>) during the last week of November 2020 and harvested all the photographs including captions that were found on their homepages. From the homepages, the authors also clicked into the secondary pages and harvested all the photographs including the captions. All in all the authors were able to gather 57 photographs from UPD, 43 from ADMU, 125 from DLSU, and 59 from UST, or a total of 284 photographs.

As already mentioned, the theoretical framework of this research is based on the schematization done by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) involving four levels of visual analyses, based on their literature review of published research on the analysis of images and photographs. The four levels of visual analyses identified by Rodriguez and Dimitrova are the studies of visuals as: 1) denotative systems, 2) stylistic-semiotic systems, 3) connotative systems, and 4) ideological representations.

The first level of visual analysis focuses on the identification of the objects and discrete elements that are actually shown in a given image

or photograph while the second level focuses on the stylistic conventions and technical transformations that were involved in creating a given image or photograph. Table 1 presents some of the fundamental elements and conventions involved in the study of visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems, as well as their corresponding meanings, as summarized by Shahjahan, Estera, Bae, and Sonneveldt (2020) from the works of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), Bradley (2010), and Heinrich (2017).

Element	Convention	Meaning
Viewpoint	Lower Angle	Objects/persons are endowed with power over the viewers
	Higher Angle	Viewers are endowed with power over the objects/persons
	Close Shot	Sense of intimacy
	Long Shot	Impersonal sense and wider view
Foreground/ Background	Foreground	More emphasis
	Background	Less emphasis
Lines	Contrast between Foreground and Background	Can create dramatic effects and suggests some sense of distinction to either the object/person on the foreground or background
	In General	Can guide the viewers towards certain portions of the images or photographs
Lighting	Straight	Stability
	Curved	Softer effect
Lighting	Highlights	Focus on certain portions of the images or photographs
	Darkness/Brightness	Create atmospheric impressions of calmness, or warmth, or gloom

Table 1: Some of the Fundamental Elements and Conventions in the Study of Visuals as Stylistic-Semiotic Systems Based on the Summary of Shahjahan, Estera, Bae, and Sonneveldt

On the third level the focus is on the culturally understood implicit meanings conveyed by the objects and persons in a given image or photograph. The study of visuals as ideological representations, as the fourth and final level of visual analysis, is heavily based on Barthes (1957) semiotic theory, and focuses on the ideological discourses, as well as socio-political and economic traces, that were consciously, semi-consciously, or even unconsciously tucked beneath some iconic images and photographs.

There are key questions that need to be answered per level. In the first level, the key question is what is being depicted; in the second level, it is how is such being depicted; and in the third level, it is what is being implied or symbolized by the object or person being depicted in a given image or photograph; in the fourth, the key questions are what interests are being pursued by such images and photographs, whose interests are these, whose voices dominate, and what deeper ideas are there. For this paper, only the results based on the first three levels will be discussed. As previously mentioned, the results of analysis for the fourth level are discussed in another research paper authored by the same research group.

The 284 photographs gathered were presumably intended for the stakeholders of these four HEIs. After the photographs were harvested, these were clustered per university in accordance with the main functions and features of HEIs,

namely: teaching, research, extension, internationalization, campus and facilities, and student life. From these clustered photographs, the authors of this paper proceeded with the interpretations: one using the first, second, and third level visual analyses as schematized by Rodriguez and Dimitrova. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this paper.

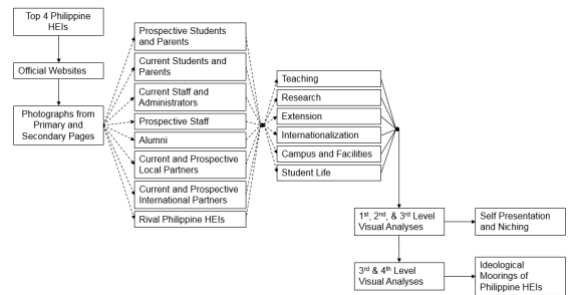


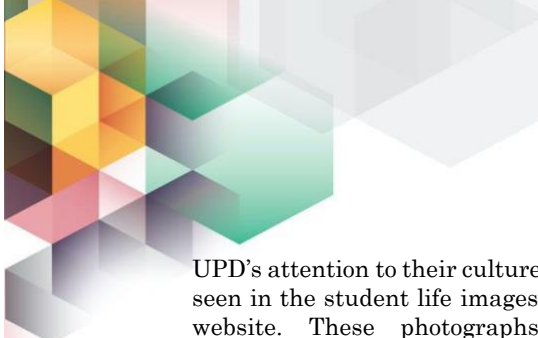
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this section of the paper, we will discuss the individual self presentations and positionings of the four selected Philippine HEIs based on the first three levels of visual analyses.

University of the Philippines Diliman. Based on the 57 photographs gathered from its website, UPD positions itself as an educational institution dedicated to the nation. Backed by its history and tradition, it teaches and molds its students to be critical citizens and leaders of the Philippines. This is evident in the visual representations on UPD's website where teaching and campus and facilities (with 27 photographs each) are strongly represented in the images gathered from its website. In their online real estate, UPD was able to highlight the key resource in developing their students - their faculty who are given recognition for accomplishments in their fields and important personalities such as their administrators. These images are close shots and provide a sense of intimacy between the subject and the viewer. The Oblation statue, the iconic nationalistic symbol of the university, and the *sablay*, the official academic costume of UPS reflecting indigenous Filipino culture, were also recurring themes in its website highlighting the importance of these symbols in their teaching. The UPD website also emphasizes the available learning and research spaces for students and faculty. It is able to answer one of the main concerns of students in choosing a university - access to facilities.

With 22 photos, the student life area came in third followed by the research area with 11 photos.



UPD's attention to their culture and tradition can be seen in the student life images gathered from their website. These photographs featured student activities with several images dating back to the earlier years of the university. In contrast to images of the UPD faculty and administrators, these images are generally long shots of students in activities conveying a perspective that the university is not student centered. The images on research pertain to researchers and faculty members who received national and international recognition for their work and facade shots of the buildings dedicated for this use.

On the other hand, the least represented visually are UPD's extension and internationalization programs. Although UPD has existing international linkages and accepts international students, these engagements are not visually represented on their website.

Ateneo de Manila University. For ADMU, the visual representation of its campus and facilities (15 photographs) is the strongest. These photographs use wide, aerial, low angle, and long shots showcase the university's surrounding environment. Its website is able to display its top notch facilities and spell the mark of Ateneo education that strives for both academic competence and value formation through a deliberate progression of learning. The second most visually represented is the area of teaching (13 photographs) which depicts the tools of the trade such as laboratory, production studio and laptops as well as photographs pertaining to the Ignatian values portrayed through images of statues and chapels. Ignatian values espouse total formation of each individual to eventually create impact to their communities. These images depict the institution's commitment to hone its graduates to become transformative leaders.

The areas of internationalization and student life are represented with five photographs each. ADMU's images of internationalization are long and wide shots of student interactions. The photographs on student life portrays images of student participation in innovative academic instruction as well organizations and co-curricular opportunities. These visuals made use of top shot, close-up shot, and medium shots.

The two least visually represented in ADMU's website are its research (2 photographs) and extension (3 photographs) areas. This calls for the university's website to evidently represent its programs of pursuing scholarly investigation and its mission of forming men and women with and for others.

De La Salle University. The 125 photographs from the DLSU website shows strong self representation in the teaching (88 photographs) and student life (85 photographs) areas. These images show how the university is promoting dynamic and innovative teaching and learning practices and providing a well-equipped avenue for students holistic learning opportunities. The photographs show images of collaborative effort among its stakeholders who are committed to furthering the Lasallian mission, the holistic approach of teaching and learning, and the innovative teaching with the strategic use of digital technologies.

The third most visually represented is the university's campus and facilities with 68 photographs. These images showcase its different campuses and world class facilities available for students and faculty research activities including laboratories, classrooms, open spaces, learning commons, libraries. On the other hand, 50 photographs from the DLSU website pertain to its research areas which show research facilities, with both students and teachers doing research inside university facilities, on the field, and in conferences. These manifested the high value that DLSU places on research.

The weakest representations are in the extension (11 photographs) and internationalization (14 photographs) areas. While there are pieces of evidence pertaining to extension and internationalization, the photographs available on the website are not sufficient to support the initiatives of the university under these categories.

University of Santo Tomas. Majority of the photographs from the UST website pertains to the student life highlighting the emphasis that the university puts in this area. These 36 photos highlight university traditions, student activities, and cultural events and performances on its official website. There is a dominance of students in the collected photographs and absence of teachers, thus portraying the UST learners as active agents of learning. The second most visually represented in the UST website is its campus and facilities where images of the architecture in its campus are given prominence including structures which were declared by the National Museum of the Philippines as National Cultural Treasures. These photographs were taken using long and lower angle shots which make the structures look bigger compared to its normal size and give them symbolic power over the viewer. Vertical lines were also emphasized in the photographs. These images portray the prestige and stability of the university as well as its colonial

experiences, historical and religious significance, and notable resistance to the various challenges and issues during colonization and at this present time. UST's beautiful heritage campus attracts students and makes it a context of their various activities. UST is now owned by Filipino Dominicans and this serves its historical connection to colonization.

The third and fourth most visually represented UST's website are its extension and teaching areas with nine and eight photographs, respectively. Extension photos focus on UST's COVID-19 response and highlight the involvement of the stakeholders (faculty, alumni, and students) in these endeavors. The website also features a collage of activities which features UST's community development program. For teaching, there were no photographs that directly depict academic scenes, classroom interactions, or laboratory work from the UST website. However, it features images that showcase religious and spiritual formation events highlighting the central role of religion in the teaching and formation of students in the university.

For the UST website, the least visually represented are the areas of internationalization with four photos and research with three photos. Internationalization is depicted through images that feature diplomatic corps including images of ambassadors delivering speeches or interacting with UST officials. Research on the other hand is portrayed through photographs of its research building and *Discurso de Apertura*, an academic lecture which was first delivered in 1866 and is a symbol of research conversation and exchange of ideas between distinguished academic leaders and starting researchers. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Catholic identity of the institution is emphasized in these photographs. The research complex was named after St. Thomas Aquinas, patron saint of the university and of Catholic schools. The academic lecture was also held at the university parish church despite its academic nature.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the analyses of gathered photographs from the websites of the top four Philippine HEIs, this paper was able to establish that UPD has strongest self representation in teaching, and campus and facilities; ADMU in campus and facilities, and teaching; DLSU in teaching and student life; and UST in student life, and campus and facilities. This paper was also able to establish that UPD has weakest self representation in extension and internationalization; ADMU in research and

extension; DLSU in extension and internationalization; and UST in research and internationalization.

Table 2 below presents the overall ranking of the four universities' main functions and features. Teaching as well as campus and facilities are on top of the ranking while student life, internationalization, and research place third, fourth, and fifth respectively. Visual representations for extension fell short which brings the said function in the sixth rank.

Areas	UPD	ADMU	DLSU	UST	Average Rank
Teaching	1.5	2	1	4	2
Research	4	6	4	6	5.5
Extension	6	5	6	3	5.5
Internationalization	5	3.5	5	5	4
Campus and Facilities	1.5	1	3	2	1
Student Life	3	3.5	2	1	3

Table 2. Summary of area rankings of the visual representation of the Philippines Top 4 HEIs

For the top four universities in the Philippines, the areas of teaching and campus and facilities are on average the most visually represented in their websites. The website as an online real estate is utilized by the four universities to communicate with their various stakeholders. Teaching may be portrayed directly (DLSU and ADMU) and indirectly (UPD and UST) but remains the central focus of all the universities. It reflects how in the Philippines universities and colleges are considered for their abilities to educate and develop students as functioning citizens of the country.

While, the images on campus and facilities gathered from the websites of the four HEIs emphasize the spaces available for learning and research in their institutions. More than being an area that is easiest to portray because these are concrete objects, campus and facilities are also used to communicate that these HEIs have the resources to fulfill their brand promise to educate an individual and secure a better future. These images are also used to reflect the storied history of the HEI (DLSU and UST) and convey that these institutions have proven that they are reliable universities wherein you can entrust your or your child's education. The emphasis on their history also projects how these institutions are prestigious and play significant roles in the history of the Philippines and in driving its development through education as well as in active participation in society.

Research and extension ranked lowest among the six areas. The underrepresentation of images pertaining to research supports the idea that the four Philippine top HEIs are still teaching universities or in transition to research universities.

While ADMU and UST have significant research accomplishments, they have not declared themselves as research universities. On the other hand, while UPD and DLSU have proclaimed themselves as research universities, they are not fully considered as one. Thus, it can be said that there is still no real research university in the Philippines.

Meanwhile, the lack of focus on research of these top HEIs also affects their extension programs, since extension is dependent on research and real extension services need to rely on the result of research activities. Structured partnerships with the community to establish formal research and innovation efforts have not been practiced in the country, resulting in short term community extension engagements and disparity between discovery and applied research.

Internationalization being in the mid rank displays that the four HEIs recognize the need to respond earnestly to “a rapidly changing globalized world and be mindful of global competitiveness” (CHED, 2012) to sustain the institution’s relevance. Similarly, portraying a vibrant student life is also given emphasis on all the websites of the subject universities. Based on the photographs gathered we can sense the importance that these universities afford in promoting the fun of student life which also reflects that these HEIs are seeking higher or sustainable enrollment.

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