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**The Construction of Knowledge on “Quality” in Higher
Education: A Study of Universities’ Websites in India**

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Abstract: In the context of India, the current paper studies the ways in which select public and private universities are representing themselves on their own website. In the process, the objective is to reveal what claims on “quality” in higher education (HE), are made by these universities; and how and why marketing power/knowledge influences these claims. Adhering to a critical realist discourse analysis approach, the paper not only describes the discourse on “quality” in HE on the selected universities’ websites but also makes an attempt to explain why marketing power/knowledge has come to have causal influence over the ways of knowing about “quality” in HE. Invoking, a moderate constructionist theory which is compatible with critical realism, it is accepted that knowledge on “quality” in HE is constructed discursively. However, these constructions are also

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shaped by non-discursive factors such as materiality, structural, institutional and physical embodied elements. The paper finds marketing power/knowledge is invested in the statements—both visual and textual, particularly on private universities' websites. As mainstream marketing literature and practice recognize HE as a service and conceptualizes student/parent as a consumer, these universities' websites have emerged as a site of playing out internet marketing strategies. There is an emphasis on tangibilization of the so-called HE service so that a prospective "student/parent-consumer" can see and find it cognitively easy to *understand* "quality" in HE. Consequently, one finds an emphasis on the discourses of "rankings", "recognitions", and "infrastructure" on these websites. In addition to this, one also finds influence of post-modern marketing and post-modern attitude towards truth on these statements. Marketers believe more in the appeal of these statements than in their authenticity. However, instead of invoking a relativist approach where only cultural factors are invoked to explain these influences, this paper hints towards materiality such as the ephemerality of the web, among others, as causal factors shaping these discourses.

Keywords: quality; higher education; critical realism; marketization; marketing power/knowledge; university website

La construcción del conocimiento sobre "calidad" en la educación superior: Un estudio sobre sitios web de las universidades en India

Resumen: Teniendo a India como contexto, este artículo estudia las formas en que algunas universidades públicas y privadas se representan a sí mismas en sus sitios web. El objetivo es revelar qué afirmaciones sobre "calidad" en educación superior (ES) son hechas por estas universidades; y cómo y por qué el poder/conocimiento de marketing influye en estas afirmaciones. A la luz de un análisis de discurso de corte realista crítico, el artículo no solo describe el discurso sobre "calidad" en ES en los sitios web de las universidades seleccionadas, sino que también intenta explicar por qué el poder/conocimiento de marketing ha tenido una influencia causal en las formas de saber sobre "calidad". Invocando una teoría construccionista moderada que es compatible con el realismo crítico, se plantea que el conocimiento sobre "calidad" en ES se construye de forma discursiva. Sin embargo, estas construcciones también están conformadas por factores no discursivos, como materialidad, elementos estructurales, institucionales y físicos. Los hallazgos muestran que el poder/conocimiento de marketing emergen en las declaraciones, tanto visuales como textuales, especialmente en los sitios web de universidades privadas. Tal y como la literatura y la práctica de marketing reconocen a la ES como un servicio y conceptualizan a los estudiantes/padres como consumidores, los sitios web de estas universidades se han convertido en un sitio para desarrollar estrategias de marketing en Internet. Hay un énfasis en la tangibilización del llamado servicio de ES para que un posible "estudiante /padre-consumidor" pueda verlo y encuentre cognitivamente fácil de entender "calidad" en la HE. En consecuencia, se observa un énfasis en discursos de "clasificaciones", "reconocimientos" e "infraestructura" en estos sitios web. Además de esto, también se encuentra la influencia del marketing posmoderno y la actitud posmoderna hacia la verdad en estas afirmaciones. Los mercadólogos creen en el atractivo de estas declaraciones en lugar de en su autenticidad. Sin embargo, en lugar de invocar un enfoque relativista en el que solo se invocan factores culturales para explicar estas influencias, este artículo hace referencia tanto a la materialidad como la condición efímera de la red, entre otros, como factores causales que dan forma a estos discursos.

Palabras clave: calidad; educación superior; realismo crítico; comercialización; poder/conocimiento de marketing; sitios web de la universidad

A construção do conhecimento sobre "qualidade" no ensino superior: Um estudo de websites de universidades na Índia

Resumo: Este artigo estuda as maneiras pelas quais algumas universidades públicas e privadas se representam em seus sites na Índia. O objetivo é revelar quais afirmações sobre "qualidade" no ensino superior (ES) são feitas por essas universidades; e como e por que o poder / conhecimento de marketing influencia essas afirmações. À luz de uma análise crítica do discurso realista, o artigo não apenas descreve o discurso sobre "qualidade" no ES nos sites das universidades selecionadas, mas também tenta explicar por que o poder / conhecimento de marketing teve uma influência causal em modos de saber sobre "qualidade". Invocando uma teoria construcionista moderada que é compatível com o realismo crítico, argumenta-se que o conhecimento sobre "qualidade" no ES é construído discursivamente. No entanto, essas construções também são constituídas por fatores não discursivos, como materialidade, elementos estruturais, institucionais e físicos. Os resultados mostram que o poder / conhecimento de marketing surge em declarações, tanto visuais quanto textuais, especialmente em sites de universidades privadas. Assim como a literatura e a prática de marketing reconhecem o SE como um serviço e conceitualizam os alunos / pais como consumidores, os sites dessas universidades se tornaram um local para o desenvolvimento de estratégias de marketing na Internet. Há uma ênfase na tangibilidade do chamado serviço de ES para que um possível "estudante / pai / consumidor" possa vê-lo e achar cognitivamente fácil de entender "qualidade" em ES. Consequentemente, há uma ênfase nos discursos de "classificações", "reconhecimentos" e "infra-estrutura" nesses sites. Além disso, há também a influência do marketing pós-moderno e da atitude pós-moderna em relação à verdade nessas declarações. Os profissionais de marketing acreditam na atratividade dessas declarações, e não em sua autenticidade. No entanto, ao invés de invocar uma abordagem relativista em que apenas fatores culturais são invocados para explicar essas influências, este artigo refere-se tanto à materialidade quanto à condição efêmera da rede, entre outros, como fatores causais que moldam esses discursos.

Palavras-chave: qualidade; ensino superior; realismo crítico; marketing; poder de marketing / conhecimento; sites da universidade

Setting the Context

Focusing on "quality" in higher education (HE), has been a major thrust of the recent public policy initiatives in India. So, for instance, the XIIth Five Year Plan (2012-17) of India proposed "a paradigm change... [where] an overriding emphasis will [would] be given to quality" in HE (Planning Commission, 2013, p. 90) and more recently, the Three-Year Action Agenda (2017-18 to 2019-20) of the NITI Aayog, a policy think tank of the Government of India (GoI), gave special emphasis on improving "quality" in Indian higher education (HE) sector (NITI Aayog, 2017). While "quality" in HE is a contested concept (Barnett, 1992; Tam, 2001), dominant policy discourses and practices in India, emphasize on conceptualizing "quality" in ways so that it becomes measurable, comparable and comprehensible (Mishra, 2007); whereby universities are held externally accountable to some quality assessing agencies (Dill, 2000; Stella & Bhushan, 2011). In the Indian context, the institution of the National Assessment and Accrediting Council (NAAC) in 1994 (Stella & Bhushan, 2011) and the recent establishment of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), Ministry of Human Resource Development, GoI, in 2015, are steps in the direction of assessing and ordinarily measuring, respectively, the "quality" of universities by external bodies (Nandi & Chattopadhyay, 2013). In 2010, the Academic Performance Index (API) based Performance Based Appraisal System

(PBAS) was introduced to measure the performance of faculty members of public universities and colleges in India (Das & Chattopadhyay, 2014). Recently, with the dominance of global university rankings by business entities like the THE and the QS; the GoI aims to position a few selected universities in the top rankings of these league tables in the coming years (UGC, Institutions of Eminence Scheme). In effect, universities are expected to respond to these policy changes by becoming more data conscious, research oriented, internationalized, among other things, arguably, improving “quality” of HE (Houston, 2008).

However, universities are not passive entities with no causal powers and liabilities of their own (Sayer, 2000), which would simply respond to and adapt these *formal* “quality” constructs without creating their own narratives on “quality” in HE. With marketisation of HE, universities are embracing business practices to improve their cost efficiency and goal effectiveness (Bok, 2009; Rothschild & White, 1993; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Washburn, 2008). One of these business practices include university marketing efforts (e.g. Canterbury, 2000; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Maringe & Gibbs, 2008), which include adopting internet marketing strategies (Kittle & Ciba, 2001; Opoku, Abratt, & Pitt, 2006; Simões & Soares, 2010), by virtue of which universities actively and discursively construct the idea of “quality” in HE. In the digital age, university website has emerged as an important material-platform where universities do engage in strategic behavior, seeking competitive positional advantages in HE market by adopting business-related discourses and practices (Caiazza, 2011; Fotiadou, 2018; Kem & Morpew, 2014; Mautner, 2005; Zhang & O’Halloran, 2013). This is particularly relevant for private universities, which are student-fee dependent and thereby, feel the pressure to market their product/services in HE.

In the context of India, the current paper studies the ways in which select public and private universities are representing themselves on their own website. In the process, the objective is to reveal what claims on “quality” in HE, are made by these universities; and how and why marketing power/knowledge influences these claims. Adhering to a critical realist discourse analysis approach, the paper not only describes the discourse on “quality” in HE on the selected universities’ websites but also makes an attempt to explain why marketing power/knowledge has come to have causal influence over the ways of knowing about “quality” in HE. Invoking, a moderate constructionist theory which is compatible with critical realism, it is accepted that knowledge of “quality” in HE is constructed discursively. However, these constructions are also shaped by non-discursive factors such as materiality, structural, institutional and physical embodied elements. The paper finds marketing power/knowledge is invested in the statements—both visual and textual, particularly on private universities’ websites. As mainstream marketing literature and practice recognize HE as a service and conceptualizes student/parent as a consumer, these universities’ websites have emerged as a site of playing out internet marketing strategies. There is an emphasis on tangibilization of the so-called HE service so that a prospective “student/parent-consumer” can *see* and find it cognitively easy to *understand* “quality” in HE. Consequently, one finds an emphasis on the discourses of “rankings,” “recognitions,” and “infrastructure” on these websites. In addition to this, one also finds influence of post-modern marketing and post-modern attitude towards truth on these statements. Marketers believe in the appeal of these statements rather than their authenticity. However, instead of invoking a relativist approach where only cultural factors are invoked to explain these influences, this paper hints towards materiality such as the ephemerality of the web, among others, as causal factors shaping these discourses.

In this way, the current study contributes to the existing literature in two-fold ways. Firstly, the discourses on selected Indian universities’ websites are studied to reveal what claims on “quality” in HE are made, and how and why marketing power/knowledge is invested in these claims. Secondly, methodologically, the study provides a possible, conjunction of moderate social constructivism with critical realism, implemented on a digital platform like university website.

HE in India: Rise of the “New” Private Universities

Today, India has a number of private HE institutions. Almost half of the university-level institutions are managed and financed privately. In November 2018, out of 882 university level institutions, there were approximately 317 state private universities and 125 deemed to be universities, mostly private. Apart from this, there are several, self-financed colleges as well. Historically, variants of private HE institutions existed in India. In this respect private HE is not a new feature of Indian HE system. However, the kind of new private HE institutions, that one sees today are quite different from these earlier variants. This is not specific to India, across the globe, the new private institutions seek to generate if not profit then reasonable amount of “surplus” aimed to earn an economic return on their investments (Olmedo, 2016). Thereby, it is inevitable that such objectives will have a bearing on the structure, processes, actions and discourses of the private universities, today. Describing the Indian HE landscape, Levy (2008) mentioned about an explosive growth of the new private sector, quite private in finance, governance as well as mission (Wall Street Journal, 2007, cited in Levy, 2008), in contrast to an —old private sector.

In education policy making in India, earlier, private HE had been looked upon as a threat to “quality” because of its possible commercial objectives. However, more recently, private higher educational institutions have been endorsed and recommended by the government itself as a panacea to the hitherto issue of poor “quality” education (Planning Commission, 2012). It is argued that the private universities take off the burden of financing HE from the public ex-chequer, have their incentives aligned to their performance and are quick to adopt innovative ways to improve “quality” in HE. To what extent, the “new” private universities in India are able to address the “quality” issues in HE, is a matter of investigation. In this study, one refers to the universities’ websites to study what claims on “quality” in HE are made by private as well as public universities and why. One also aims to explore how and why marketing power/knowledge influence these discourses. In doing so, one acknowledges that neither public nor private universities can be clubbed into homogenous category. There exist various types of universities within the private as well as the public sector. The current paper studies universities’ websites of 6 universities (three public and three private) holding different positions in the national ranking framework (NIRF, 2017).

Knowledge, Reality and Social Construction

In the book *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckman (1991) argued that “reality” as well as “knowledge” are socially constructed. According to them, while reality is the phenomenon that exist independent of our wish or control, knowledge is the certainty that phenomenon is *real* and possesses certain characteristics. It is knowledge that makes reality meaningful for any lay person. Remaining within the sociology of knowledge framework and committing to relativist and constructivist approaches to enquiry, Berger & Luckmann (1991) mentioned that the taken for granted knowledge itself is constructed by thoughts and actions of individuals, manifests in social processes and is situated within the context of the society. They, therefore, mentioned that the foundations of knowledge in everyday life are curated by culture, language, temporal structures and social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The social construction of knowledge has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Valsiner (1994) identified interaction as the source of co-construction of knowledge that influences learning and development. Accordingly, through social interactions, individuals align or realign their own ideas and expertise to create new meanings and understandings (Greeno & Engeström, 2006). Reality, therefore, is concept dependent. These concepts are constructed by

epistemic communities, which are, in turn, are subject to social processes and contexts. Thus, radical constructivists would argue epistemologies are socially constructed and there is no way to access reality which is not socially mediated. Thus, if one aims to study “statements” or texts both verbal and visual, with the purpose of investigating what and how knowledge about a certain phenomenon is constructed, it seems plausible, one should rely on interpretative tradition of meaning-making of the text under consideration. One way of doing this would be to follow Foucauldian discourse analysis. For Foucault (1980), studying the statements involves engaging with the discourse. Discourse are filters through which people see the world and which defines what counts as knowledge and truth. Often labelled as a radical constructivist, Foucauldian account of discourse is said to be focused on the interpretation of the statements.

However, as Elder-Vass (2012) pointed out, Foucault was never concerned about the interpretation of the statements *per se*, for him more important were the investigation of the discursive rules that govern those statements. For Foucault these discursive rules reflect the effect of power/knowledge. What Foucault is concerned here is with the micro powers that are part of the thinking as usual of everyday life. Thus, a close study of statements and discourse, can direct one to unravel the power/knowledge that perpetuate a certain way of thinking and being. For a critical realist, while it is meaningful to know what and how discourses shape social reality, however, interpretative paradigm falls short of explaining why certain discourses come to have causal influences over the ways of knowing and being in the world (Elder-Vas, 2012). In critical realism, while discursive factors construct social reality, however, these constructions are constrained by the limitations and possibilities of material, structural and physical embodied conditions as well. Thus, critical realism combines “constructionist and realist positions to argue that while meaning is made in interaction, non-discursive (real) elements also have an impact on that meaning” (Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007, p. 102). Elder-Vass (2012) argued that the “reality” that Berger and Luckman (1991) mentioned is “social” reality, and thereby, *is* socially constructed. For critical realist, reality is shaped by the conjunction of less visible structures and mechanisms with causal abilities, including non-discursive factors, that are needed to be investigated by researchers.

As a result, this study proposes and adopts a critical realist discourse analysis approach with an aim to improve the interpretative approach by identifying causal entities that may give rise to certain discourse to prevail. Notwithstanding, social constructionism is seen as an anti-realist approach with severe implications on how we interpret the social world, efforts have been put to combine social constructivism with critical realism. By not just relying on language/communication or more broadly cultural interactions only, this study also emphasizes on causal mechanisms in the material world, in the embodied personality of individuals and in the social structures that may influence the discourse (Bhaskar, 2013).

“Quality” in HE and Marketing Power/Knowledge

“Quality” in HE means different things to different people (Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003; Lewis & Smith, 1994; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996). The academic professionals would like to associate a tacit and mostly non-tangible conceptualisation of “quality” in HE, by emphasizing on the values and propriety shared within the academic community (Barnett, 1992). Other key characteristics associated with this notion of “quality” is the academic professionals’ focus on human factors like altruistic concern for students, educational expertise, high level of autonomy, generation of new knowledge, application of logic, use of evidence, conceptual and theoretical rigour and the disinterested pursuit of truth (Kolsaker, 2008). However, in an alternative conceptualization, “quality” in HE is related to “performance” that can be measured. With the advent of neo-liberal

management of “quality” in HE, “quality” in HE is reduced to “performance indicators”, where, “quality” is assured and universities are benchmarked against each other, by external bodies like quality assurance agencies, accreditation bodies and global ranking agencies (e.g. Olssen and Peters, 2005).

In this paper, one argues that with marketisation of HE and growing influence of marketing power/knowledge gives new meanings to the idea of “quality” in HE. To this effect, one argues that marketing power/knowledge invested in the discourses and practices of universities, shapes much of what comes to be thought, seen and believed as “quality” in HE. In a market-like setting, “quality of a good or service is constructed by multiple actors, based on various value systems, as manifested in the practices of the buyers, sellers and other agencies” (Callon, Méadel, & Rabeharisoa 2002). These scales are not measuring “quality” that exists out there, but *actively constituting* it by emphasizing on some characteristics of the good over the other. Here, one does not adopt a technical conceptualisation of the body of knowledge termed as “marketing”. Marketing is “no stable set of practices or ideas, what counts and what will not count as marketing depends upon local contingencies and changes over time” (Araujo, Finch, & Kjellberg, 2010). Thereby, one needs to study marketing activities empirically and analyse them as instances of facilitating market transactions. Thus, when it comes to marketing “quality” in HE, one needs to empirically engage with the discourses and practices in “quality” in HE by the university. By adhering to this approach, the current paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the ways in which universities are self-representing themselves on their own website? In the process, what claims on “quality” in HE, are made?
- How and why marketing power/knowledge of “quality” in HE is constructed on universities’ websites?

Studying University Website

Universities are actively representing themselves on their own websites. They are aware that their websites are the first point of contact between a prospective student/parent and what all universities have to offer. As universities expect to get student applications from wider regional, national and global landscape, their emphasis on telecommunication technology is expected. Moreover, it is also realized that in the digital age, universities are actively appropriating digital spaces which include universities’ websites, online applications portals, profile on social networking websites, “googleability”, presence on micro-blogs etc. Web as a site of discursive formation has been now realized, and there has been some research on universities’ websites (Caiazzo, 2011; Kem & Morphey, 2014; Zhang & O’Halloran, 2013). While Mautner (2005) pointed out that business-related lexis is now well-established in the university’s repertoire including on their website, Zhang and O’Halloran (2013) mentioned university websites addresses potential students as consumers of university education. Kem and Morphey (2014) found university website communicating message that are consistent with private purposes of education and inconsistent with those linked to public purposes. More recently, Fotiadou (2018) found university website reproduces and promotes neo-liberalism.

Another aspect that’s worthy of a discussion is whether relying on web as the source of data can justify critical realist approach to discourse analysis that the current study commits to. While one examines the discourses on “quality” in HE on universities’ websites as an entry point to study the influence of marketing power/knowledge, however, one does not remain contained within the discursive features of the content and design of the websites. Instead, the chosen discourse is further

situated within the material, structural and embodied conditions, that impose constraints as well as provide possibilities for certain type of knowledge about “quality” in HE to be constructed.

Method

The current study is a part of a three stage PhD work of the author. In the first part of the study, “quality” in HE as represented (or not) on universities’ websites was studied. In the second stage, an in-depth study of academic-managers, the encoders of the university websites, is carried out. In the final stage student-customers, the decoders of the university websites, are studied. The current paper is based on the first part of the study; however, it does take insights from other stages of the study.

The current paper undertakes two levels of analysis. Firstly, in the context of India, the study aims to examine the discourses on universities’ websites pertaining to what claims on “quality” in HE are made, and how marketing power/knowledge of “quality” in HE is discursively constructed. For this purpose, one investigates websites of six universities, three public and three private, based in India using web-based content analysis (Herring, 2009).

Secondly, adhering to a moderate constructionist theory which is compatible with critical realist approach in social sciences, one also explores why universities happen to invoke a particular discourse on “quality” in HE on their websites. In particular, the objective is to find the non-discursive reasons behind why marketing power/knowledge has come to influence the way universities are representing themselves on their own websites. Using critical realist framework and relying on the secondary literature, the study identifies non-discursive factors such as materiality, embodiment and institutional and social structures that shape the statements of “quality” in HE on universities’ websites.

Websites of three private universities (University A, B, C) and three public universities (University D, E, F)—two federal/central universities (University D and E) and one provincial/state university (University F) were studied. The choice of these universities is not random but purposive. The aim is not to lay out a design for comparative analysis of these universities’ websites *per se* but to bring out those cases which tell the richest, thickest and most telling stories. On the number of cases, one takes cue from Seidman (2006) that it is the most salient portions of the data corpus that should be subjected to intensive analysis. Since the emphasis was on what aspects are being highlighted by the universities about themselves, thereby, only the landing page and “About us” pages of the websites were studied. Along with this, insights were drawn from other sources such as other web-pages on the selected universities’ websites, university brochure as well as the secondary literature.

While University A (pvt) and University C (pub) do appear in the top cream of the top 100 nationally ranked universities (National Institutional Ranking Framework, 2017); University B (pvt) and University F (pub) appear somewhere in the middle of the top 100 ranked universities; University C (pvt) and University D (pub) do not feature in the national rankings but in other private rankings, they are positioned at the lower end of the league tables. Accordingly, the websites of these universities are named. University A’s website is referred to as Hi-pvt, University B as Mid-pvt and University C as Low-pvt; and University D as Hi-pub, University E as Mid-pub and University F as Low-pub.

In the selected set of universities, there is a mix of old and new, public and private universities, with fair representation of universities from all parts of India. However, the selected new private universities are selected from the north of India. This is because the growth of new private universities in India since mid of 2000s, has concentrated in the northern region. Another

factor that was kept in mind, while drawing these universities, was to ensure that the websites of the chosen universities were functional and a certain amount of effort has been put to represent the universities on them. All private universities are relatively, high-fee charging universities vis-à-vis selected public universities. There is not much of fees difference between private universities. All three public universities are relatively, low-fee charging universities. University A is a relatively old private university. It offers a number of professional courses like management, engineering and design. It has almost 2,500 faculty members and 22,000 students. University B became operational in the mid 2,000s. It has 2,500 faculty members and close to 33,000 students. It offers range of courses from aeronautical science to interior design to Sanskrit studies. University C was established in the mid 2000s. It has nearly 600 faculty members and 10,000 students. It offers relatively less but range of professional courses from engineering to education. University D is a public university established in the 1970s. It offers a range of courses from life sciences to social sciences. It has nearly 650 faculty members but only 3,200 students. University E is another federal university. It was established in the mid 2,000s and offers a range of courses from professional courses like engineering and journalism to non-professional courses like sociology. There is very little information about total number of students and faculty members in the university. University F is a provincial public university. It has close to 680 faculty members and approximately 5,000 students. It offers mostly non-professional courses ranging from zoology to economics. One has refrained from giving more information about the universities to protect their identities.

To deal with the issue of ephemerality of web, several screen shots of the landing page of the universities’ websites were preserved. Further, these data were subjected to coding on the basis of direct and indirect claims on “quality” in HE. These codes were then thematically analyzed to bring out the overarching discourse on “quality” in HE. As noted below, while both public and private universities’ websites were subjected to this analysis, it was the websites of the private universities that were active in using their website as a marketing platform.

Findings

The findings of the study and the discussion that follows from them have been presented in the following two sections. In the first section, the content of the websites studied, are systematically presented, highlighting how universities represent themselves on their own websites. Here, a web-based content analysis of the websites is undertaken and discussed. In the second section, invoking critical realist perspective, material, structural and physical embodied factors are invoked to discuss why certain discursive rules are followed than others.

The following section describes the features and designs as well as the texts and themes on the selected universities websites. The findings reveal, among the six public and private universities’ websites studied here, the private universities’ websites emphasis on visual representation of different elements of the universities. In particular, all three private universities’ websites highlight university infrastructure. Moreover, these websites are relatively interactive and are loaded with multi-modal messages directly addressing prospective students. While there is no dominant message on public universities’ websites, the messages on the private universities’ websites highlight rankings, accreditation as well as other awards and recognitions achieved by the universities.

How are Universities Representing Themselves on Their Own Website?

Features and design. There is a visible difference between the aesthetics of the websites of the private and the public universities. While the private universities’ websites are loaded with multimodal messages including high resolution pictures, videos, images with the option of 360-

degree view etc.; public universities' websites emphasis on texts and pictures only. Hi-pvt is a vibrant website directed to prospective students. With the users getting the opportunity to start a live chat with the university representative, on the landing page itself, Hi-pvt also gives an option to take a 360-degree tour of the university campus and start the application process. Hi, Mid and Low-pub do not give the option of live chat, however, one can always contact the universities via email or phone-call. There is no mention of starting the application process on the landing page. It appears, the public universities' websites are predominantly used for notification purpose for universities' own students and faculty members. The landing page of all three private universities websites show high resolution pictures of students involved in various activities. Hi-pvt shows students intensively working on what appears to be a mini-rocket, another student seems to be in sound recording studio with headphones on and appears to be speaking on a microphone. Mid-pvt shows pictures like students standing in a lab, shooting with a camera, taking a close look at cells of some micro-organism using microscope etc. In contrast to this, Hi-pub displays only a few pictures showing architectures, flora and fauna at the university. Interestingly, although the landing page of Hi-pub shows these images, nearby, there is a tab mentioning "skip to the main content". On the main content page, there is a minimalist display of images on Hi-pub. There is a dedicated section on "photo-gallery" where images of the events at the universities are displayed. Mid-pub displays a number of pictures but that of actual events felicitating the faculty and the students of the university. Low-pub displays a number of images of ministers visiting the campus. The pictures displayed on Hi and Mid-pvt do not seem to be a candid click of actual events. Even if they were, most of them are portrait image of one or two individuals depicting the act. In contrast to the images shown on the private universities' websites, public universities' websites show images clicked from actual events held in the universities.

A summary of the web content analysis focusing on features and design of the universities' websites studied here, is presented in Table 1. The section following Table 1 mentions the findings of the web content analysis focusing on the text and theme that are dominant on these websites.

Table 1
Findings of the Web-Content Analysis: Features and Design

Landing Page Analysis	Hi-pub	Mid-pub	Low-pub	Hi-pvt	Mid-pvt	Low-pvt
Image	Flora and fauna at the university with an option to "skip to the main content" of the webpage.	Infrastructure at the university, showing university building. Convocation group picture. Famous personality visiting the campus.	Ministers visiting campus. Infrastructure at the university, showing university building. Events (seminars and conferences) at the university	Portrait images of individual students working on high-end machines. Infrastructure showing university campus, bird's-eye view images of the university campus (Drone-images). Students decked up in corporate formal-wear, posing for the camera.	Portrait images of individual students-working exotic machines. Infrastructure showing university campus. (Drone-images). Students decked up in corporate formal wear, studying in class. Common room/library showing escalators. Students consuming food in posh canteen. Events (seminars and conference) in the university.	Portrait images of individual students-working exotic machines. Infrastructure showing university campus. (Drone-images). Students decked up in corporate formal wear, posing for the camera.

Table 1(Cont'd.)

Findings of the Web-Content Analyses: Features and Design

Landing Page Analysis	Hi-pub	Mid-pub	Low-pub	Hi-pvt	Mid-pvt	Low-pvt
Graphic/Flashiness/Dynamism	Revolving images of the flora and fauna at the campus that can be skipped. Moving text notifying/announcing the events at the university.	Moving text notifying/announcing the events at the university.	Revolving images. Moving events notifying/announcing the events in the university Newspaper reporting (local and mostly vernacular) of events in the university.	Revolving images. No flashy images or messages.	Revolving images. Hints of flashy messages.	Revolving images. No flashy images and messages.
Background colour and design	White, mostly text.	Green at the top and mostly white.	Blue at the top and mostly white.	Neutral tones other than white.	Bright multi-colours-blue, yellow, black.	Bright multi-colours-blue, white, red.
Freshness	Mentioned, recently updated	Mentioned, recently updated	Last updated is not mentioned.	Last updated is not mentioned.	No mention of last updated. Admission related data are recent. Many information on the website are dated.	Last updated is not mentioned. Many information on the website are dated.

Table 1(Cont'd.)

Findings of the Web-Content Analyses: Features and Design

Landing Page Analysis	Hi-pub	Mid-pub	Low-pub	Hi-pvt	Mid-pvt	Low-pvt
Navigability to other web pages within the website	At the top, there is a mention of – about us, academics, administration, faculty, students, library and admissions.	At the top, there are tabs for about us, academics, research, administration and student.	At the top, there are tabs for academics, administration, central library, facilities	At the top, there are tabs for about us, admission, academics, campus life, research, and Apply now	At the top, there are tabs for about us, admission, academics, campuses, infrastructure, research, happenings(events), Apply now	At the top, there are tabs for about us, admission, academics, campuses, infrastructure, research, happenings (events). Easy navigation to Apply now
Link(s) to other websites	No	Yes Tenders, Information under RTI, IQAC, All India Survey on HE etc.	At the bottom of the page, there are links to navigate to other social networking and micro-blogging websites where the university has a presence.	Scholarship to study abroad To the foundation supporting the university	University has a dedicated website to sell merchandise, for parents, for alumni, placement portal. Links to these websites are given.	No

Source: Author's own compilation from the findings of the study.

Text and theme. While the messages on the landing page of the public universities' websites, are not directed towards any particular audience, the messages on the private universities' websites are clearly addressing prospective student(s). Some messages on the public universities' websites are meaningful only for the current students and faculty members. No message on the private universities' websites are directed towards the existing students and faculty members. No message is particularly highlighted on Hi-pub. However, all other websites have highlighted a few messages. The Hi-pvt mentioned "rankings and recognition" as the first highlighted message on the landing page. It mentions its ranks in various league tables. The Mid-pvt also highlights its ranking, however, it does not mention the actual rank achieved. It highlights "Ranked among the top universities in Asia..." by some regional rankings of a global university rankings agency. Here, claim on formal indicator of "quality" in HE is neither supported by any data nor is the statement hyperlinked to the webpage of the source. The Low-pvt does not mention anything about the rankings. This might be because Low-pvt does not have a rank in the national and global rankings. However, the landing page has highlighted messages like- "Your entrepreneurial dream begins here" and "Pursue a semester abroad@ zero tuition fee".

The landing page of Mid-pub highlights its accreditation status by mentioning "Got A+ Grade in NAAC". It also highlights its rank among the provincial universities by stating-"[X] in State University[Universities]..." . It also mentions that it has been ranked no.[X] in India by a global ranking agency. However, unlike Mid-pvt university, it does hyperlink this claim to another page on its website. That page mentions that Mid-pub university has secured a rank between 600 and 800 universities in the world by a global university rankings agency. The Low-pub neither mentions ranks nor accreditation. The landing page highlights messages related to some event happening in the university campus—"Blood Donation Registration". Mid-pvt university mentions that it is "Consistently Ranked no.1" without any substantiation. Both High-pvt and Mid-pvt also mentions about statistics about size of the campus, number of students, number of programmes offers and research centers in the campus. Table 2 mentions the findings of the web content analysis focusing on the text and theme that are dominant on these websites.

Table 2
Findings of the Web-Content Analyses: Text and Theme

Landing Page Analysis	Hi-pub	Mid-pub	Low-pub	Hi-pvt	Mid-pvt	Low-pvt
Home page expected user(s)	Messages on the webpage not directed towards particular users.	Messages on the webpage not directed towards particular users	Messages on the webpage not directed towards particular users	Prospective students	Prospective students	Prospective students
Landing page-revolving Flashy/ bold messaging	No particular message is highlighted.	Got A+ Grade in NAAC [X] in State University[Universities] ...	Blood Donation Registration Application Form	Rankings and recognition Get a taste of [the university] through faculty and virtual tour-advertising open house sessions in various cities.	Awarded as India's best research university Ranked among the top universities in Asia	Your entrepreneur-ial dream begins here Pursue a semester abroad@ zero tuition fee
Other dominant message(s)	Quote of the day that keeps changing daily	Ranked no. [X] among Indian Universities by THE World University Rankings.	Series of Extension Lectures Announcing guest lecture series at the university.	University legacy depicted by a timeline of events Statistics on campus size and number of students, programmes offered, and research centers.	Consistently Ranked no.1 Grooming leaders who are not only thorough professionals but good human beings with values.	Statistics on campus size and number of students, programmes offered, and research centers.

Source: Author's own compilation from the findings of the study.

Towards a Critical Realist Approach

Dominance of Marketing Power/Knowledge

HE is not a regular economic good that can be bought and sold in the market. At best, it can be called a process that cannot be subject to market mechanisms as such. However, with the transformation of HE sector becoming business-like and the dominance of marketing power/knowledge in lubricating market-making in HE, the importation and customization of knowledge systems in the traditional management sciences, into HE is manifested. Marketers realize the peculiar characteristic of HE and thereby its objectification takes unique forms. While management sciences considers HE as a service (e.g. Palihawadana and Holmes, 1999), marketing literature realizes the intangibility and imperceptibility of HE service (Tarn, 2001). Gale (1994) mentions about “creating quality and service that customer can see.” Tarn (2001) argue that four strategies can be, in particularly useful, to increase consumers’ sense of tangibility towards services. These strategies are namely- Quantitation/Ranking, Factualization/Substantialization, Word-of-Mouth Effect, and Information Frequency. He also argues that tangibility of service can in particular increase by Quantification/Ranking. In the following four sections, on the basis of the findings of the first section and a survey of secondary literature, one discusses why marketing power/knowledge has emerged as the dominant discourse on “quality” in HE, highlighting the role of non-discursive factors.

Engagement with Global and National Rankings

While there is a noticeable difference between the discourses on public and private universities’ websites, there is an overarching importance given to rankings of universities. The Hi-pvt and Mid-pvt highlight their rankings data, as both of them engage with national as well as global university rankings. Although, the Hi-pub do not display its ranking, despite of it being at the top of the (national) league tables but it does mention its position in national HE rankings somewhere on the webpage. The Hi-pub do not engage with either national or global university rankings at all. The Mid-pvt displays university rankings in the state/province; as it does not feature in the top in the national rankings. The Mid-pvt, however, displays its performance in one of the global university rankings. While it does not mention its rank in the global university rankings, it mentions that it is among the “top [X] national universities in the global university rankings”. Therefore, global university rankings are invoked to project positioning in the national higher educational landscape. In other words, Mid-pvt does not feature at the top on national university rankings but feature as among the top 2 universities in the national HE landscape, according to a global university rankings agency.

One of the reasons behind mainly private universities emphasising global university rankings could be that not all universities in India, yet, have participated in the global university rankings. The material reality of these universities is the driving force determining a university’s closeness to the global university rankings. Rankings are costly and affordable by resourceful universities like high fee charging private universities (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2008). Not only it is a time-consuming process, which requires dedicated university personnel who should work on them, full-time but also requires huge sum of financial resources to be invested. Money is spent on applying for rankings as well as to get consultancy service(s) about them, often provided by the same ranking agency, without much backlash against possible conflict of interest.

When it comes to institutional structures, one may argue that there has been a greater emphasis placed on the rankings, both national and global, by the Government and HE regulatory bodies in India (NITI Aayog, 2017; NIRF, 2017, 2018). The ‘new’ private universities, in particular,

are responding to these governmental emphases on rankings to either gain legitimacy or more likely to differentiate themselves from the rest in the HE landscape. One can argue that rankings are easier to understand (Kahneman, 2011), and can be shared easily among peers and community, in comparison to abstract ideals of academic professionals. Consequently, quantification or rankings is enthusiastically adopted by the marketers (Tarn, 2011) and consumed and reproduced by students/parents.

Emphasis on Infrastructure and Other Visual Details

As previously noted, the imperceptibility and intangibility of HE has led marketers to explore the possibilities of creating vales that customers can see (Gale, 1994). Emphasis on infrastructure, scale of operation, famous personalities visiting campus have emerged as new talking points about “quality” in HE. These data points provide simplified “information” which can be easily reproduced in social interactions by the students/parents for peer-group discussions and conversations with relatives etc. (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Instead of sharing abstract ideals of academic professionals about “quality” in HE, it is easy to share pictures of the physical infrastructure of the university as a proxy of “quality” in HE, justifying the emphasis on visuals on universities’ websites and visual marketing, in general.

Invoking the economic context of India, one can argue that poor infrastructure is a pertinent issue in the country (Agrawal, 2015). Availability of physical infrastructure, which is particularly, aesthetically pleasing, therefore, becomes a selling point for the marketers of education. One may also consider that the material platform of web has its own set of limitations as well as possibilities Universities need to reduce their messages on “quality” in the texts both—verbal and visual. While verbal texts are directed towards factualization of “quality” in HE, the web as a material platform provide immense possibilities of putting up audio-visual substantiation of “quality” in HE leading to tangibilization of university education (Santos, 2002; Stafford, 1996).

The emphasis on visuals can also be attributed to the rise of attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Human attention is now conceptualized as a scarce commodity, and marketers are putting efforts to get the most of it. It is inevitable that marketers focus on aspects that would captivate students/parent attention, in the most convenient manner. Visuals do have a cognitive advantage over other formats, to put across message(s) and captivate the attention of the audience. These results are supported by vision science (Palmer, 1999), cognitive psychology and research on eye tracking (Rayner, Chase, Slattery & Ashby, 2006).

“Awards” and “Recognition” Beyond Rankings

While universities are engaging with the national and global rankings on their websites, not all universities are able to boast about their positions in the rankings. However, they are aware that they need to put up messages claiming their “quality” to prospective students/parents. In our study, the mid and low ranked universities (both public and private) fall in this category. However, it is the Mid-pvt and Low-pvt that are engaging with non-governmental “recognitions” of “quality” in HE, other than rankings. These “recognitions” often take the form of “awards” or “certificates.” For instance, Mid-pvt university B has been awarded “Indian Education Awards” for research and Low-pvt university C has been declared “Great Place to Study Research Institute.”

A closer look at the working model of these non-governmental award agencies, bring forth the point that these agencies augment the marketing possibilities of these universities rather than being unbiased, third party evaluators of “quality” in HE. They not only give awards or provide citations to the universities but also work with them to achieve these objectives. Thereby,

universities and these agencies do not share the relationship of assessor-assessee only, rather, universities become their “clients” who have paid fees for the consultancy service of these agencies.

Hints of Postmodern Marketing

Firat and Venkatesh (1993) see “modern marketing” as a post-modern institution. They attempt to link marketing and post-modern sensibilities and emphasized on their mutuality. “Postmodernism have made marketing practices, promotional campaigns and consumption culture central topics in their debate” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). The subjects or the individuals are no longer autonomous agents who make choices over objects or products, in accordance to their own tastes and preferences. Rather, it is the cultural expectation of the society that determines what will be consumed. Marketing becomes the ultimate legitimizing tool (Habermas, 1973) that resolves all kind of conflicts. As long as something is marketable, i.e. there is a possibility of signifying them, they are worthy of investment and consumption. While emphasis on infrastructure, performativity and external validation as found on universities’ websites in the present study, can be attributed to the cultural expectations of the society as well; as noted before, this paper also picks up non-discursive factors behind these discourses.

Pseudomodernism and Metamodernism

Attributing it to the advent of new technology, Kirby (2013) mentions that the subjects have taken the centre-stage once again, however so much only that the prefix “pseudo” to any modernistic characteristics is utterly relevant. While the post-modernists would argue that the individual sits powerless in front of the spectacles of the contemporary culture and therefore, is a mute spectator of the cultural product(s) mediated by marketing; pseudomodernist would argue that it is the action of the individual that produces the cultural product, itself. It is similar to the notion put forth by the postmodern marketing theorists, when they say it is the act of consumption that produces the product-the self-image and in the process sign value is produced. However, pseudomodernism makes the participation of the consumers, intrinsic to the production of the product itself. In the current study, Low-pvt, on its landing page, displays a picture of a rocket with the message—“Your entrepreneurial dream begins here” and “Pursue a semester abroad @zero tuition fee,” in both the cases student-consumer’s active participation is necessary for the realization of the “service” being offered by the university. The anxiety of the pseudo-modern individual (here, student) might render them incapable of critically engaging with these statements and make them susceptible to the overload of data and statistics on the websites. Marketing has taken advantage of this situation and ensured that a number of formal as well as informal constructs of “quality” are presented on the websites. Hi-pvt and Mid-pvt put data and statistics about the size of the campus, the number of programmes offered, the number of other campuses under the same brand etc. Their claims on “quality” in HE here remains, critically, unchallenged.

“Quality” in HE in a Post-Truth Society

Keyes (2004) argued that we live in post-truth era, where people dissemble quite often, although they do not utter lies. Instead truth is massaged, sweetened and improved, as warranted by the situation. Keyes connect post-truth to postmodernism by saying that the intellectual backdrop of postmodernism which denied the existence of universal truth actually paved way for post-truth. While postmodernism paved way for the deconstruction of any claim of objective truth and acceptance of relativism, it also made possible the absurdity due to excesses of relativism. In this study, Mid-pvt claims that its university’s name is “synonymous with excellence”, “...this is why we are consistently ranked no.1;” Low-pvt claims—“...the world is here at [the university name].” Most

of these messages are not substantiated. Marketers believes in the appeal of these “tag lines” rather than their authenticity. Moreover, ephemerality of the webpage ensures that, any back lash is immediately responded to, by updating the website. This happened in the case of the universities under investigation in this paper. Data on the landing page of Mid-pvt was changed and some of the dubious claims on their website were taken off, during the course of the data collection. Thus, although whether postmodernism is dead or not can be debated, the postmodern attitude towards truth has survived. Post-truth can be referred to as applied postmodernism (Keyes, 2004). Table 3 summarizes the findings of the critical realist discourse analysis carried out in this paper.

Table 3
Towards Critical Realist Discourse Analyses Approach

Claims on “quality”	WHY?			
	Social Interaction	Materiality	Social Structure/Institution	Embodiment
Rankings	Simplifying “information” by providing simple data points for the consumer-student/parents for peer-group discussion, conversation with relatives etc. (Espeland & Sauder, 2007, p.16).	By charging high fees universities can afford rankings especially global rankings (Hazelkorn, 2008; Amsler & Bolsann, 2011). Academic professionals’ idea of quality is complex and abstract (Barnett, 1992), difficult to display on a material platform.	Regulatory bodies and government policies embracing rankings (NITI Aayog, 2017, p.138; UGC, 2017; NIRF, 2017, 2018) Rise of new public management and new managerialism (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007)	Cognitive abilities (Kahneman, 2011). Cognitive ease to explain and understand rankings. Academic professionals idea of quality is complex and abstract, require cognitive effort.
Infrastructure and other visual details	Same as above	Indian economic infrastructure as scarce commodity (Agrawal, 2015). Limitation of web as a material platform	Rise of the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001) Tangibility in services (Stafford, 1996; Santos, 2002) Create values that customer can see (Gale, 1994)	Vision Science (Palmer, 1999), Cognitive psychology, Eye Tracking (Rayner, 1998).

Table 3 (Cont'd.)
Towards Critical Realist Discourse Analyses Approach

Claims on “quality”	WHY?			
	Social Interaction	Materiality	Social Structure/Institution	Embodiment
Awards and Recognition	Same as above	Emerging markets for awards accessible by high fee charging universities as found in the present study.	Neoliberal managerialism (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007, p. 9).	Cognitive abilities (Kahneman, 2011)
			Growing importance of external accountability (Dill & Soo, 2004).	Cognitive ease to explain and understand rankings.
Post-modern marketing; pseudo- modernism and post-truth claims	Same as above	Ephemerality of the web as a material platform (O'Donnell, 2007).	Mistrust in the internal functioning of the university via academic professionals, unravelling the black-box (Baert & Shipman, 2005).	Academic professionals' idea of quality is complex and abstract, require cognitive effort.
			Inability of the traditional university ethos and value system to meet the growing demand of quality in HE.	Self-validation of the students and the parents.

Source: Author's own compilation from the findings of the study.

Conclusion

In the context of India, the current paper studied the ways in which select public and private universities are representing themselves on their own websites. In the process, the objective was to reveal what claims on “quality” in HE, are made by these universities; and how and why marketing power/knowledge influences these claims. Given that HE cannot be conceptualised a regular economic good or service, marketers are putting efforts to tangibilize its various aspects including its notion of “quality”. The paper found marketing power/knowledge is invested in the statements—both visual and textual, particularly on private universities' websites. The tangibilization of the so-called HE service is aimed at the prospective “student/parent-consumer” so that they can *see* and find it cognitively easy to *understand* “quality” in HE. Consequently, one finds an emphasis on the discourses of “rankings”, “recognitions”, and “infrastructure” on these websites. While “quality” in HE has no single agreed meaning, marketing efforts in HE emphasizes on tangible aspects of “quality”, in the process, marketers do not hesitate to invoke post-modern marketing narrative as well as post-modern attitude towards truth in “quality” discourse. However, instead of only focusing cultural forces behind these discourses, the paper argued possibilities of material factors shaping the discourse. In particular material context of the universities, the limitations and possibilities of web as a platform, rise of the attention economy as well as the cognitive abilities of individuals were posed as possible non-discursive factors shaping the ways in which universities are representing themselves

on their own websites. Thereby, providing possibilities for certain type of knowledge about “quality” in HE to be constructed as well as consumed and reproduced by students/parents.

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