COMMUNICATIVE DIMENSIONS OF EDUCATIONAL MARKETING DISCOURSE: A CONCEPTUAL AND PRAGMATIC EXPLORATION

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Abstract: This article explores the communicative architecture of educational marketing discourse, focusing on how higher education institutions construct relational proximity, institutional ethos, and audience engagement through strategic language use. Drawing on speech act theory, politeness frameworks, metadiscourse analysis, and multimodal discourse theory, the study examines how universities perform relational work and simulate dialogic exchange in promotional texts. It introduces the concept of *promotional interpersonalization* to describe the strategic use of conversational tone, inclusive language, and dialogic structures aimed at humanizing institutional voice. The article also considers platform-specific adaptation and the integration of visual-verbal resources in digital environments. By foregrounding the pragmatic and multimodal dimensions of educational marketing, the study proposes a conceptual framework for analyzing promotional discourse as a dynamic act of interaction, persuasion, and identity negotiation.

Keywords: Promotional interpersonalization; educational marketing discourse; speech act theory; multimodal analysis; institutional communication; audience engagement

1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, institutional communication has become a strategic imperative. Universities are no longer defined solely by their academic offerings or research output; they are also active participants in a global discourse of visibility, reputation, and engagement. As such, educational marketing has evolved into a complex communicative practice, wherein language functions not only as a vehicle for information but as a performative resource for constructing institutional identity, fostering relational ties, and negotiating audience alignment (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

This communicative shift reflects broader transformations in the public role of universities. Faced with increasing competition for students, funding, and international partnerships, institutions have adopted promotional strategies that blend rhetorical persuasion with interpersonal appeal (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Their discourse is shaped by pragmatic considerations—how to address diverse audiences, how to mitigate power asymmetries, and how to simulate dialogue in monologic formats. Promotional texts, whether published on websites, disseminated through social media, or delivered in formal speeches, are crafted to resonate emotionally, culturally, and cognitively with their intended recipients (Chapleo, 2015).

This article approaches educational marketing discourse from a communicative perspective, emphasizing its interactional, pragmatic, and multimodal dimensions. It draws on speech act theory, politeness frameworks, and engagement models to analyze how institutions perform relational work through language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969;

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Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hyland, 2005). It also considers the role of visual and digital semiotics in shaping message reception and audience involvement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Central to this inquiry is the concept of *promotional interpersonalization*, which we define as the strategic simulation of interpersonal dialogue within institutional messaging. This original construct captures the tendency of universities to adopt conversational tones, inclusive language, and dialogic structures in order to humanize their brand and foster communicative proximity.

By foregrounding the communicative logic of educational marketing, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of institutional discourse in higher education. It proposes a conceptual framework for analyzing promotional texts not as static genres but as dynamic acts of interaction, persuasion, and identity negotiation. In doing so, it invites further research into the pragmatic and multimodal strategies that shape how universities speak to the world—and how the world listens.

Last but not least, this study complements our earlier work on the linguistic characteristics of educational marketing discourse (Ciobanu & Dejica, 2025), which focused on lexical patterns, syntactic structures, and rhetorical strategies in institutional messaging. Building on that foundation, the present article expands the analytical scope to include pragmatic functions, multimodal adaptation, and the newly introduced concept of *promotional interpersonalization*.

2. Theoretical Framework

The communicative perspective adopted in this article is grounded in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and multimodal discourse analysis. These frameworks enable a nuanced understanding of how educational institutions construct meaning, negotiate relational dynamics, and engage with diverse audiences through promotional discourse.

Speech act theory, as developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), provides a foundational lens for interpreting institutional utterances as performative acts. In educational marketing, universities routinely employ assertives (“We are internationally accredited”), directives (“Apply now”), commissives (“We will support your journey”), and expressives (“We are proud of our students”) to convey credibility, commitment, and alignment with stakeholder values. These acts are embedded within genre conventions and shaped by audience expectations, platform constraints, and cultural norms.

Politeness theory, particularly the model proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), offers insight into how institutions manage face-threatening acts and construct relational proximity. Promotional texts often employ hedging (“We strive to offer...”), boosting (“We are deeply committed to...”), and inclusive pronouns (“We believe in your potential”) to mitigate power asymmetries and foster solidarity. LoCastro (2012) expands this framework by emphasizing the sociolinguistic variability of politeness strategies across cultures, a perspective particularly relevant in multilingual and international educational contexts.

Hyland’s (2005) model of interactional metadiscourse further illuminates how institutions engage readers through self-mentions, attitude markers, and reader-directed questions. These features personalize the institutional voice and simulate dialogic exchange, creating a sense of involvement and shared purpose. In promotional discourse, metadiscursive elements are strategically deployed to guide interpretation, express stance, and reinforce institutional ethos.

Multimodal discourse analysis, grounded in the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), extends the communicative lens to include visual, spatial, and interactive

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resources. In digital environments, educational institutions integrate imagery, layout, typography, and color to co-construct meaning alongside verbal content. These semiotic choices are not merely aesthetic; they perform communicative functions that shape audience perception, emotional resonance, and brand coherence.

In addition to these foundational models, the article draws on recent scholarship in educational marketing to contextualize the communicative strategies of universities. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) emphasize the strategic role of branding and visibility in higher education, while Maringe and Gibbs (2009) highlight the importance of stakeholder engagement and value communication. Chapleo (2015) critically examines the tension between promotional rhetoric and institutional authenticity, a theme that resonates with the concept of promotional interpersonalization introduced here.

3. Promotional Interpersonalization: Concept and Relevance

We introduce the concept of *promotional interpersonalization* to describe a distinctive communicative strategy in educational marketing discourse. Defined as the strategic simulation of interpersonal dialogue within institutional messaging, this original construct captures the tendency of universities to adopt conversational tones, relational cues, and dialogic structures in order to humanize their brand and foster proximity with prospective students and stakeholders. Through inclusive language, rhetorical questions, and simulated engagement, institutions perform relational work that transcends informational delivery, positioning themselves as responsive, empathetic, and audience-oriented communicators.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in digital promotional genres, where institutions blend formal authority with affective engagement. The use of second-person pronouns (“You will thrive here”), rhetorical questions (“Looking for a university that values innovation?”), and inclusive language (“Join our community”) exemplifies how promotional texts simulate dialogue and construct a reader-oriented discourse (Hyland, 2005). These features are not merely stylistic; they reflect a deeper communicative orientation toward empathy, responsiveness, and audience alignment.

Promotional interpersonalization also manifests in the integration of multimodal resources. Visual elements such as student testimonials, campus imagery, and infographic narratives contribute to the construction of institutional ethos and emotional resonance. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that such semiotic choices are central to meaning-making in digital environments, where visual-verbal alignment enhances message coherence and affective appeal.

From a pragmatic standpoint, promotional interpersonalization involves the deployment of speech acts and politeness strategies that simulate relational interaction. Institutions use commissives to express commitment (“We will support your journey”), expressives to signal pride or empathy (“We are proud of our diverse student community”), and mitigated directives to invite action without imposing authority (“Explore our programs today”). These acts are calibrated to balance promotional assertiveness with relational sensitivity, shaped by genre conventions and cultural expectations (Brown & Levinson, 1987; LoCastro, 2012).

The relevance of promotional interpersonalization lies in its capacity to bridge the gap between institutional voice and audience expectation. In an increasingly competitive and culturally diverse academic landscape, universities must communicate not only what they offer but how they relate. By simulating dialogue and fostering

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emotional engagement, promotional texts perform relational work that is central to institutional branding and stakeholder trust (Chapleo, 2015; Gibbs & Knapp, 2002).

4. Multimodal Adaptation and Platform-Specific Voice

In the digital age, educational marketing discourse is increasingly shaped by multimodal configurations that extend beyond linguistic content. Institutions communicate through a blend of visual, textual, and interactive elements, adapting their strategies to the affordances and constraints of specific platforms. This multimodal turn reflects a broader shift in institutional communication, where meaning is co-constructed through the interplay of semiotic resources (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Institutional websites typically adopt a formal and informative tone, structured around hierarchical navigation and comprehensive content. Here, multimodality is used to support clarity and credibility, with visual elements functioning as anchors for textual elaboration. Social media platforms, by contrast, encourage a more conversational and visually driven style. Posts often feature concise captions, emojis, hashtags, and user-generated content, creating a sense of immediacy and relational proximity. These stylistic shifts are not merely aesthetic; they reflect strategic choices aimed at audience engagement and brand differentiation (Chapleo, 2015).

Rectoral speeches and ceremonial addresses represent yet another communicative register, where multimodality is expressed through audiovisual delivery and symbolic framing. These genres prioritize ethos construction and institutional gravitas, often employing scripted language, emblematic imagery, and choreographed staging to convey authority and tradition. The adaptation of communicative style across these platforms reflects a strategic modulation of institutional voice, calibrated to the expectations and interpretive habits of distinct audience segments (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Similar thematic structuring and platform-specific variation have been observed in online institutional tourism discourse (Dejica & Stoian, 2016), where contrastive studies highlight how thematic development is shaped by genre, medium, and audience orientation (Dejica, 2004; Dejica, 2006; Stoian & Dejica, 2016).

Dialogic engagement is increasingly facilitated through interactive features such as comment threads, live chats, and embedded videos. These mechanisms simulate conversational exchange and invite audience participation, enhancing authenticity and responsiveness. User-generated content—testimonials, tagged photos, shared experiences—further contributes to the co-construction of institutional identity. As Wilkins and Huisman (2012) argue, such participatory strategies are particularly relevant in transnational education contexts, where institutions must navigate diverse cultural expectations and communicative norms.

The multimodal and adaptive nature of educational marketing discourse underscores the complexity of institutional communication. Universities must balance formal authority with relational warmth, integrating semiotic resources to produce coherent and persuasive messages. This communicative agility is central to the institution's ability to connect meaningfully with its publics and to maintain relevance in an increasingly competitive academic landscape.

5. Typological Traits and Hybrid Messaging Patterns

Educational marketing discourse is characterized by a typological diversity that reflects its communicative versatility. Institutional messages vary in intent, tone, and structure,

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ranging from informative announcements to emotionally charged invitations. This section proposes a typology of promotional messaging based on pragmatic function and rhetorical composition, while also examining the hybrid nature of institutional discourse—where promotional and interpersonal elements converge.

Informative messages are designed to convey factual content about programs, facilities, rankings, and admissions procedures. These texts typically adopt a declarative tone and prioritize clarity, precision, and institutional authority. Invitational messages, by contrast, are oriented toward engagement and action. They often feature imperatives ("Apply now"), affective appeals ("Discover your future with us"), and inclusive language ("Join our community"), aiming to elicit emotional resonance and behavioral response. Affirmational messages reinforce shared values and institutional ethos, using language that validates the reader's aspirations and aligns them with the university's mission ("We believe in your potential") (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002).

These message types are frequently realized through schematic structures that reflect genre conventions and platform-specific constraints. A common configuration includes a thematic anchor ("Global Excellence Starts Here"), a value proposition ("Our programs empower future leaders"), and a call to action ("Explore our courses today"). Such structures are adapted across media, with digital platforms favoring condensed formats and visual segmentation to accommodate scrolling behavior and screen-based reading habits (Swales, 1990; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The hybrid nature of educational marketing discourse is particularly evident in the blending of promotional and interpersonal cues. Institutions often embed relational language within strategic messaging, creating texts that simultaneously inform, persuade, and connect. For example, a program description may include not only curricular details but also testimonials, inclusive pronouns, and affective language that position the reader as a valued participant in the institutional narrative. These hybrid configurations challenge traditional genre boundaries, requiring flexible analytical models that account for pragmatic function, multimodal composition, and audience orientation.

Such hybridity also manifests across linguistic registers and cultural contexts. In multilingual promotional materials, institutions may alternate between formal and informal tones, adjust politeness strategies, and recalibrate engagement markers to suit the communicative norms of different audiences. This adaptive flexibility underscores the importance of pragmatic competence in institutional communication, particularly in transnational educational contexts where discourse must navigate varying expectations of authority, relationality, and rhetorical style (LoCastro, 2012; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012).

Ultimately, the typological and hybrid traits of educational marketing discourse reveal a communicative strategy that is both structured and fluid. Institutions employ recognizable patterns to ensure coherence and brand consistency, while simultaneously adapting their voice to foster relational proximity and audience alignment. This dual orientation—toward strategic clarity and interpersonal resonance—defines the communicative complexity of contemporary educational promotion.

6. Future Research Directions

Building on the conceptual framework established in this article, future research will pursue a series of empirical investigations into the communicative strategies of educational institutions. These directions aim to deepen our understanding of

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promotional interpersonalization and explore its manifestations across linguistic, cultural, and technological contexts.

A key priority is the development of a multilingual and multimodal corpus of educational marketing texts. This corpus will include materials from institutional websites, social media platforms, rectoral speeches, and promotional brochures, with a focus on Romanian and English-language discourse. The corpus will enable comparative analysis of speech acts, politeness strategies, engagement markers, and visual-verbal alignments, supporting cross-cultural pragmatic profiling (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). It will also need to accommodate genre-blending and platform-specific variation, reflecting the hybrid nature of promotional messaging and the methodological challenge of categorizing texts that combine informative, persuasive, and relational elements.

Audience reception studies will complement textual analysis by investigating how prospective students and stakeholders interpret institutional messages. Surveys and ethnographic methods will be used to examine the effectiveness of dialogic simulation, the emotional resonance of multimodal cues, and the perceived authenticity of institutional voice. These studies will provide insights into how promotional texts are received, understood, and evaluated by their intended audiences (Chapleo, 2015).

Further inquiry will focus on the emergence of specialized promotional lexicons within academic branding. Terms such as “transformative learning,” “student-centered excellence,” and “impact-driven research” function as rhetorical markers of institutional identity and strategic positioning. Analyzing the construction and circulation of these lexicons will contribute to our understanding of terminological hybridity and discursive innovation in higher education (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

Finally, semiotic mapping of multimodal discourse will be undertaken to examine how visual and textual elements co-construct meaning in promotional materials. This will include analysis of layout, imagery, typography, and narrative framing, with attention to how these resources shape audience perception and emotional engagement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Together, these research directions reflect a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to the study of educational marketing discourse. They build on the conceptual innovations introduced in this article and position future inquiry to make substantive contributions to the fields of applied linguistics, discourse analysis, and institutional communication.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the communicative architecture of educational marketing discourse, proposing a framework for analyzing how institutions construct relational proximity, institutional ethos, and audience engagement through strategic language use. By integrating insights from speech act theory, politeness frameworks, metadiscourse studies, and multimodal analysis, the study has highlighted the performative and interactional dimensions of promotional texts.

The concept of promotional interpersonalization has been introduced to capture the simulation of dialogic exchange within institutional messaging. This concept reflects a broader communicative logic in which universities seek to humanize their brand, foster emotional resonance, and align with audience expectations. Promotional texts are not merely vehicles of information; they are acts of engagement, persuasion, and identity negotiation.

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The article has also outlined a methodological orientation grounded in pragmatic and multimodal analysis, and has proposed a research agenda that includes corpus development, audience reception studies, and semiotic mapping. These directions aim to deepen our understanding of how educational institutions communicate in culturally diverse and technologically mediated contexts.

By foregrounding the communicative complexity of educational marketing discourse, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about institutional language, branding, and public engagement. It advocates for a pragmatic and interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis—one that recognizes the strategic and relational power of language in shaping how universities speak to the world.

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