Voice and Representation: A Postcolonial Approach To Higher Education
Promotional Media And The International Postgraduate Student Experience

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Abstract

Non-Western postgraduate students are increasingly targeted by Western universities through a variety of promotional media designed to assist in their selection of a foreign institution. This media offers institutional representations of the international postgraduate student based on a range of prescriptive, often stereotypical notions of particular cultural groups. In this thesis, I argue that although the internationalization of higher education (HE) has resulted in the embedding of intercultural elements across various sectors of the university, the discourses and images used do not offer international postgraduate students a productive space to convey their identities as active participants of the overseas study experience. Drawing on the promotional media from one Western university, I illustrate how these students are portrayed as the passive but fortunate recipients of an international education and how the university claims its own institutional identity.

With the growing demand for international education, media representations of international students and the university has become an important area of study. To date, the study of HE promotional media has consisted of pure textual analyses of student prospectuses or perspective studies related to the overseas study experience of undergraduate students. Although international postgraduate students are important to university rankings and collaborative research partnerships, there has been limited investigation into the representation of this cohort and the university in HE promotional media. Additionally, the perspectives of these students on their representation and the overseas study experience remain unexplored.

Drawing on the work of postcolonial theorists such as Said, Spivak and Bhabha, I critically examine how international postgraduate students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are represented in HE promotional media and the creative ways in which they reinvent themselves. The analysis of participant narratives reveals that their expectations of the overseas study experience are influenced by ideas of institutional prestige, English Language
mastery, staff expertise, creative advertising, quality education and warm human relationships. However, the reality of their overseas study experience is often tempered with isolation and alienation leading to a deeper reflection of their burgeoning identities as global scholars. This inner journey is conveyed through a series of photographs which highlight themes of the restorative powers of Nature, mobility in a new city, cultural life, finding an identity, creating a community, coping with loneliness and embracing freedom. To locate patterns within the discourses and images related to international postgraduate students and the university in a selection of HE promotional media, I refer to the work of critical discourse theorists such as Fairclough and Van Dijk. The analysis of university web pages reveals that the university claims its institutional identity through an alignment with its research activities, evoking its rich historical past and claiming credibility through certifications obtained from international regulatory bodies such as the Nobel Foundation.

This thesis uncloaks the subtle ways that ideas about universities and individuals are normalized through discourses and images constructed by powerful social institutions. By drawing on postcolonial literature and sourcing the perspectives of less dominant voices, I provide unique insights into how this cohort negotiates the overseas study experience and claim their distinct identities in an unfamiliar environment.
Author declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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