

Creolized Media

Siberian Universities Websites Through the Eyes of a Foreign Audience

Site for International Students

Nowadays information technology oriented to highly efficient information space is at its height. This process results in emerging *new media* creating *new opportunities for communication*. For companies and institutions that wish to keep up with the times and are ready to meet new challenges, new media becomes one of the most effective ways of communicating with different audiences. New media communications interfere with different spheres of our life including education. In addition to putting computer technologies into practice, educational institutions today want to be represented in the internet media space. The internet coverage is necessary for high-status universities to attract foreign students. The number of foreign students who study at the university can serve as a criterion for university rankings all over the world (for example, in the QS World University Rankings).¹

One of the most attractive markets in the international educational space is the Chinese market. A great number of young Chinese people want to study abroad. According to statistics presented by UNESCO, Chinese students represent 14% of the total number of students who study abroad worldwide.² This figure is higher than the number of Indian students, a striking fact given that, India ranked first in the recent past. In this regard, we should mention that the Chinese are active internet-users. According to figures from The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), in 2013, the number of Internet users in China is 485 million people,³ it is about a quarter of all the Internet users in the world.

Taking the geographic proximity of Russia and China into consideration, it is necessary to mention that Russian educational institutions are extremely interested in attracting students from China. This makes the development of electronic communications by Russian universities with the Chinese tar-

1 QS World University Rankings - Top Universities [Electronic resource]: www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings (15.09.2013)

2 China Ranks first in the World by the Number of Students who Study Abroad. [On-line newspaper: [Electronic resource]: russian.people.com.cn/31517/7951840.html (15.09.2013)

3 Modern Youth of China Portrait. [Information business portal: [Electronic resource]: www.inform.kg/ru/interesnoe/399#axzz2fA5UBBed (15.09.2013)

4 According to the data from the International Programs Office of the National Research Tomsk State University (2013).

5 California and New York attract the largest number of foreign students. [ПАРТА: Electronic resource]: www.parta.org/news/?news_id=1553 (10.09.2013).

get audiences particularly important. This issue is of great current interest for Siberian educational institutions, including Tomsk universities. According to official statistics, only 5920 foreign students⁴ study at six Tomsk universities, not including students from the former Soviet republics. By way of comparison, 8000 foreign students attend the University of California (Los Angeles, the USA) alone.⁵ The universities of Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk concentrate their efforts to attract foreign students mostly in new media spaces.

The internet is the most relevant youth-orientated media channel. Young people can find information about universities from different information sources (social networks, blogs, electronic directories), but eventually they all visit the official site of the university in order to get up-to-date and reliable information. It is clear that the first impression helps develop the attitude of the target audience towards the university. The first impression depends on many aspects: an attractive website design, good navigation, up-to-date information, accessibility, and much more. These site assessment criteria are commonly used. However, by taking only the *universal* site assessment criteria that apply to different cultures into consideration, we can leave out the cultural peculiarities of the target audience –in this particular case, the Chinese. Very often, the content of the site is translated into English without any variations. The English version can certainly facilitate the communication with the foreign audiences, but it should be represented in a proper way in order to shape the right perception about the university, its image and brand. It is necessary for electronic communications practitioners to study the theoretical aspects of the cross-cultural communications process. They have to find the best possible *form and content* of the site's electronic »messages« to make it a tool of the university's *image* communication with the foreign audiences.

Creolized media

A website, as a means of electronic communication represents a text (hypertext) that combines two different ways of communication – verbal and non-verbal. In Russian linguistics, such texts are called »creolized texts«. This term was introduced by Yuri Sorokin and Evgeni Tarasov in 1990 to denote the texts whose »texture consists of two non-homogenous parts: verbal (linguistic/vocal) and non-verbal (belonging to other sign systems, but not natural language)« [Сорокин, Тарасов 1990:180–186]. Originally, the notion of »creolisation« denoted the process of creating new ethnic groups by means of mixing blood of several neighboring ethnic groups (this process was extremely important for human survival as it led to the appearance of *vigorous* new generations). Ethnolinguists used this term in a metaphoric sense to denote the process of formation of a new language as a consequence of mixing several languages. Many Russian linguists use the term »creolized text« to denote semiotically complicated texts (for

example, Elena Anisimova) [Анисимова 2003], others use synonymous terms, such as »isoverbal complex« (Ada Bernatskaya) [Бернацкая 2000] or »polycoded text« (Genrikh Eyger and Victor Jucht) [Ейгер, Юхт 1974]. The term »creolized text« acquires a scientific conceptualization in semiotics. It is a complex text-built formation, in which verbal and non-verbal elements create one visual, structural, sense-bearing functional unit that has an integrated effect on the addressee.

Roland Barthes in his »Rhetoric of the Image« marks out three kinds of messages in the structure of a creolized text (by giving an example of the broadsheet text): a linguistic message, a visually coded (symbolic) message and a visually uncoded (literal) message. The two latter types deal with the iconic part of the text that can contain the following types of significant: significant that indicate the object, and significant, whose designata are ideas and images [Барт 1964:21]. We can presume that the information transmitted in the first case is fully denotative, and its interpretation is not very difficult. The figure that transmits ideas and images in the form of a message is connotative. To understand it properly, the addressee must possess »the knowledge of a certain culture code, social connections, and national particular characteristics« [ibid.].

There are different views on the function of verbal and non-verbal components of a creolized text in meaning-making. However, in the context of cross-cultural electronic communication, the polyinterpretativeness of non-verbal components of the text (image, print, colour) is of utmost interest: on the one hand, their polysemy can distort the understanding of the text for a representative of the other culture; on the other hand, their symbolic nature allows them to translate connotative/cultural meanings (codes). *Cultural codes*, as particular meanings that determine the relation of a particular culture to a phenomenon or idea, are contained in symbolic messages and generate an emotional reaction to the information that makes it more valuable and meaningful in the eyes of the addressee.

A website is a creolized text that consists of verbal (headings and texts) and non-verbal (photographs, graphic design elements, infographics) elements. Adding iconographic materials to the verbal messages or writing text comments to the photographs provides the informational »redundancy« in the site messages: polycode language allows minimizing the polysemic interpretation of a certain message. At the same time, large amounts of information on the Internet make us single out visual symbols (non-verbal elements) as the most capacious and economical from the point of view of meaning delivery.

The review of the websites from the best universities around the world demonstrates the shift in emphasis to non-verbal messages in electronic communication. However, most Russian universities' websites are overloaded with the text, while non-verbal elements serve as collateral or secondary

6 Siberian Federal University: [Official website]: www.sfu-kras.ru (23.08.2013)

7 Siberian State Technological University: [Official website]: www.sibstu.kts.ru (23.08.2013)

8 Tomsk State Pedagogical University: [Official website]: tspu.edu.ru (23.08.2013)

9 National Research Tomsk State University: [Official website]: tsu.ru (25.05.2013).

10 National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University: [Official website]: tpu.ru (25.05.2013).

11 Tomsk State University of Control Systems and Radioelectronics: [Official website]: www.tusur.ru (25.05.2013).

12 In 1960–70s Geert Hofstede executed a large survey study of the multinational company IBM (International Business Machines), that has departments and subsidiaries all over the world. The researcher singled out four primary dimensions of national cultures (based on his research on the 40 largest countries): power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity [geert-hofstede.com/]; [Мауымова 2002:364].

13 Working with the scale the respondent evaluates the level of agreement or disagreement with every statement from »strongly agree« to »strongly disagree«.

messages. The sites of the Siberian Federal University (Krasnoyarsk),⁶ the Siberian State Technological University (Krasnoyarsk),⁷ the Tomsk State Pedagogical University (Tomsk)⁸ and others can serve as examples. As can be seen from the above argument, the problem of underestimating the specific features of effective electronic communication with foreign audiences by the Russian universities can be specified as a problem of the creolized text quality of their official sites. To solve this problem, it is necessary to pay more attention to the non-verbal content (colour, photographs, and stylistic material) of the site, understand the peculiarities of perception and visual information interpretation by the representatives of different cultures, and see the differences in culture meanings (codes) connected with the notions »university« and »university training«.

»The Chinese code« of the university

The first step in solving the above-mentioned problem was a survey conducted among the students from China. It was based on the materials of non-verbal content of the largest Tomsk universities' websites: the National Research Tomsk State University,⁹ the National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University,¹⁰ the Tomsk State University of Control Systems and Radioelectronics.¹¹ The research was conducted in spring 2013 by means of questionnaire survey and took two weeks. Fifty-two representatives of Chinese culture, students who study at Russian, Chinese and Taiwan universities and Chinese schools took part in the research.

The questionnaire developed for the survey contained three main sections.

The *first section* of the questionnaire included questions concerning the role of the university website as a source of information about the university. The respondents had an opportunity to express their opinion about the topic sections of the sites, choose the most interesting sections and say what language they prefer to use when they surf a university website.

In the *second section* of the questionnaire, students were presented with statements connected with the qualities typical of the Chinese culture, as developed by Geert Hofstede¹² (power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, long/short-term orientation). The statements were based on the description of productive academic values and presented the behavior of a university teacher, student or management staff typical for different situations. The Rensis Likert scale¹³ (with the items »agree«, »neutral«, »disagree«) was used in the research. The second section of the questionnaire also included open-ended questions that gave an opportunity to describe at which university the respondents wanted to study and what they liked about the educational institution where they had studied. This section of the questionnaire was used to find out the Chinese students' basic educational values in order to make appro-

priate recommendations for developing non-verbal content on the university sites aimed at the Chinese audience.

The *third section* of the questionnaire included photographs presented on the analysed university sites. The respondents were asked to choose the pictures they find the most attractive. First, it was necessary to find out what message should be coded in the university sites images to ensure its correct interpretation by Chinese students and applicants, and to understand what elements can create the image of an »ideal« university for them. The photographs were supplied with the comments to ensure the right understanding of the situations represented in the pictures.

The *research resulted* in the following issues. The role of a website as a source of information about the university is rather important. The survey has shown that the information presented on the university sites influence Chinese students and applicants' choice of educational institution. However, some of the students questioned responded that they did not have a chance to choose the educational institution, where they study, because it was determined by the state. The most popular response to the question about which language the respondents would prefer to use, while reading the information on the website, was the Chinese language. However, they remarked that they could also visit pages in English and Russian.

The responses to the questions in the second section, where the respondents were asked to specify their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements, based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, revealed a number of values for Chinese culture that are related to the following notions: »university«, »university lecturer«, »university training«. Most of the respondents believed that a university lecturer must have considerable life experience, because China is a country with high power distance index. However, China also has a low uncertainty avoidance index. That is why the Chinese students are inclined to be strongly motivated for achievement, which is confirmed by the results of the survey, where the students questioned responded that students must make their best effort to get high marks. Collectivism is commonly found in the Chinese culture, which is confirmed by the students' agreement with the statement that a group of students must make mutual decisions concerning the issues related to their studies.

However, the high level of masculinity of the Chinese culture, claimed by Hofstede's research (Hofstede states that there are considerable differences between men and women at similar workplaces), was not confirmed by our investigation in the sphere of education. For the Chinese students and applicants, the sex of their teachers or lecturers is not important. Masculinity in the educational sphere is not a valuable criterion for the Chinese. This may be connected with the »communist past« of the country, because a great number of female teachers were trained during that period.

Among the responses to the open question about which university the Chinese students would like to study were the following:

- »I would like to study at the university with a wonderful environment and good teachers«
- »I want to study at a US university because they have a free academic atmosphere«
- »I'd like to study at a university where the teachers are not only competent, but also able to teach students how to think about life, people, etc. They can help develop active thinking«.

Another question was to describe what the students like about the university where they study. The responses were as follows:

- »Rich scientific life, specific instructors, excellent activities«
- »Good teachers, free atmosphere, different events and good chances of practical training and employment«
- »Knowledgeable professors, colorful events, cooperative teams«.

The analysis of the second section responses helped us reveal the basic educational values of the Chinese students. So we can draw a conclusion that the Chinese relate the notions »university« and »university training« to the following values:

- The academic atmosphere must be free and friendly.
- The lecturers must possess good knowledge and considerable life experience.
- The university life must be interesting and full of events.
- The teaching staff of the university must be team-minded. There must be the climate of confidence between them.

Chinese culture has a collectivist culture. That is why friendly relations within the group or team are very important for the Chinese students.

- A university student must show initiative in the educational process and do his/her best to succeed in studies, science, sports, etc.

Many studies characterize China as a culture where people try to avoid uncertainty in their life, business and other living environments. As Hofst-

ede states, such countries have high accomplishment motivation, which is confirmed by our research.

In the third section, the respondents had to choose one or several pictures that they like (the pictures were taken from the websites). The photographs chosen by more than 30% of the respondents were interpreted as »successful«.

Among the photographs depicting students, about 30–40% of the respondents gave preference to the pictures where students participated in different activities and events organized at universities. The photographs with foreign students taking part in events and activities also received a good rating.

Among the photographs depicting university teachers, the highest rating (about 50 responses) received the pictures where lecturers were shown in the process of their professional activity. The most attractive for the Chinese respondents were the photographs where teachers were doing the lecturing in friendly and casual atmosphere. About 40% of the respondents gave preference to the photographs depicting teachers of mature age. Fewer respondents (about 35%) chose the photographs of recent graduates. The students questioned put special emphasis on the photographs depicting teachers in a non-academic environment: for example, playing the violin, dancing or engaged in sports activities. A great number of respondents paid attention to the photograph where a teacher was receiving an award.

Among the photographs depicting student groups, 40% of responses favored the pictures where a team of students was winning a competition (in the questionnaire there were pictures with students winning the talent show or project competition). Equally popular were the photographs depicting the student groups of different nationalities and representatives of the same culture.

Among the photographs depicting management staff of universities, 46 respondents chose the pictures where university officials, for example, a dean or rector did not express any emotions and were not engaged in any activities. Only 17% of the respondents marked the photographs where university officials were showing emotions or were depicted in informal surroundings.

Among the photographs showing the university or objects connected with the university without people, the most popular pictures were those of the university in winter and summer (about 70% of responses). Less popular were the pictures of skill acquisition equipment (41% of responses). The photograph of a squirrel near the university was very popular with the Chinese students (40% of responses).

University website: »the Chinese version«

The research analysis resulted in the development of operational recommendations for universities oriented towards electronic communications with the Chinese audience. The recommendations include verbal and non-verbal content:

- It is necessary to pay attention to the Chinese, Russian and English versions of the website as all of them can serve as a source of information for students and applicants from China.
- It is necessary to pay special attention to the photographs depicting *student groups*. China is a collectivist culture and group relations are extremely important for students and applicants from this country.
- It is effective to post photographs depicting students' teamwork: their communication, helping each other, etc.
- The group that reaches a common goal looks most attractive for Chinese students. It is necessary to post photographs showing student groups attaining a common goal, for example, winning a competition or getting an award.
- Posting photographs of Asian students is beneficial, but not compulsory. The number of students in the group is not important. These characteristics do not require special attention while working on the graphic content of the site.
- The research has shown that information about the *teacher* is very important. That is why it is essential to carefully select and edit the content devoted to the academic staff of the university.
- It is necessary to post the photographs where the teacher is engaged in his professional activity. Pictures showing teachers lecturing in casual style will be very popular.
- While working with the site graphic content it is important to put an emphasis on showing the academic staff of more senior age. Professors with considerable life experience will have more credibility. It is also necessary to take into consideration that sex and nationality are not considerably important for the Chinese audience.
- Showing the teacher in non-academic environment can also give good results. It is possible to show teachers taking part in the university events together with the students or busy with their hobbies. Such pictures can attract Chinese students because they create casual atmosphere.

- Chinese students and applicants appreciate highly competent teachers and lecturers. That is why pictures showing teachers getting their scientific awards can also be attractive for them.
- China is a country with high power distance index. The Chinese respect seniority and authority. That is why it is necessary to pay attention to the site content devoted to the *management staff* of the university.
- Posting photographs of the management staff it is important to avoid pictures showing emotions or activities.
- In the course of the research, the Chinese students had an opportunity to choose pictures that to a greater degree created the image of the university where they want to study. Analyzing their responses, we can draw the following conclusions:
 - It is necessary to show supportive educational environment: comfortable lecture halls, high-tech equipment, dormitories, canteens, attractive surroundings, etc.
 - Photographs depicting interesting university life are considered very attractive. It is important to show different events organized at the university and students' scientific and creative activity.
 - Beautiful pictures of the university can also be attractive for students.
 - Nature and animals at the university surroundings are also positively accepted.
 - It is necessary to post photographs where students take an active part in the educational process, for example, write something on the board or answer their teachers' questions.
 - In general, working on the photographic content of the site, it is worth paying more attention to »live« images showing emotions or activities. It is necessary to avoid static photographs showing lecturers, students or student groups.
 - It is essential to include some text commenting the photographs as it narrows down the number of their interpretations.

To sum up, it is necessary to mention that some of these recommendations can be considered universal and used to build up electronic communication with different target audiences of the university. However, it does not mean that »culture code« and its visualization are not important for cross-cultural Internet communication. It is more likely that we can speak about the process of »globalization« of the university educational values.

It is necessary to understand that such universal values as education, students' friendship, commitment to excellence and others can be of different importance in different cultures. That is why, dealing with the universal content of the official site, university, as communicator, must give due consideration to the interpretative issues of verbal and non-verbal creolized text messages in cross-cultural electronic communication and reckon with the addressee »culture code«.

Biographical Notes

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Recommended Quotation

Shunkina, Anastasia A.: Creolized Media. Siberian Universities Websites Through the Eyes of a Foreign Audience. In: Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, International Journal of Architectural Theory. Vol. 19, Issue 32, 2014. cloud-cuckoo.net/fileadmin/issues_en/issue_32/article_shunkina.pdf [1.10.2014]. p. 93–105.