

A Comparative Study of Chinese and American Corporate Homepages: A Hypermodal Approach

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Abstract

The homepage of a corporation has become an unprecedentedly important promotional vehicle for advertising campaign nowadays. Given the cultural sensitivity of homepages, this paper, referring to the “two-dimensional genre analysis model”, compares how the corporate homepages of “Tsinghua professional manager training center” (Tsinghua) and “Harvard ManageMentor” (Harvard) simultaneously create their corporate identity as well as their official gateway to get their products and services promoted. The results show that the homepage of Tsinghua highlights a strong sense of authoritativeness and collectivism. Besides, the information density is less than that of Harvard. Harvard, on the other hand, presents as much information as it can and values the individual’s leadership cultivation greatly. The differences are interpreted from a socio-cultural perspective and the corporations’ involvement in marketization. This paper extends multimodal approaches to hypermodal analysis and takes the relations between hypermedia and culture as well as ideology into consideration.

Keywords: Two-dimensional genre mode, Hypermodality, Corporate homepages, Inter-culture

1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has brought the hypermodal turn in the world of discourse. According to Lemke (2002), hypermodality is a conflation of multimodality and hypertextuality that aims to investigate the new interactions of word-, image-, and sound-based meanings in hypermedia. A homepage, serving as the “gateway” (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005) for entering into the website, is a typical hypermodal discourse. Different from other institutional homepages that are largely informative, corporate homepages are not only informative but more importantly, promotional by its very nature. Indeed, corporate homepages play an indispensable role in this competitive market-oriented economy, for they serve as a powerful channel through which the company can convey their identity and build their reputation worldwide.

As Askehave & Nielsen (2005) pointed out, homepage is among the first web-generated texts to have reached genre status. A genre is a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture (Martin, 1984; cf. Littlefair, 1991). Based on this definition, corporate homepages, as a special genre, definitely have their genre-specific features in terms of structure, purpose, and more importantly, cultural and ideological identity. However, comparative analysis of corporate homepages between China and America from the intercultural perspective can be hardly found. In view of this, this paper, taking the two homepages of “Tsinghua professional manager training center” and “Harvard ManageMentor” as examples, explores the corporate, cultural and ideological differences between Chinese and American homepages.

2. Literature Review

In the field of hypermedia discourse studies, one category of research focuses on the understanding of hypermodal genre in general (Lemke, 2002; Fritz, 1998; Djonov, 2005, 2007; Zhao, 2010). Another category takes an intercultural perspective to hypermedia discourse. For example, Knox (2007) made a diachronic comparative analysis of the online English version of “Bangkok Post”, “People’s Daily” and “Sydney Morning Herald” respectively. Tan (2011) compared the meaning construction patterns of online business news from Bloomberg, CNBC, FOXBusiness and Reuters; Zhang and O’Halloran (2012) investigated the cultural differences between the website design of Tsinghua University and the National University of Singapore based on visual grammar. Cucchi (2015) analyzed different linguistic features displayed on the homepages of different European countries where English is used as a lingua franca. It’s certain that these researches have greatly contributed to the understanding of distinct features of hypermodal discourse as a special genre as well as their culture-specific traits.

However, the comparative researches up to now have been mostly webpages of nonprofit institutions, leaving the typical profit-oriented corporate homepages between China and America unexplored. As a result, this paper, referring to the “two-dimensional genre analysis model”, investigates the differences between Chinese and American corporate homepages, aiming to bring some implications for creating culturally sensitive homepages for both Chinese and American corporations in this era of global economy.

3. Theoretical Framework of the Present Study

Given the features of digital genre, Danish scholar Askehave & Nielsen (2005) extends the traditional genre analysis model for printed text advanced by Swales (1990) and proposed the two-dimensional model for genre analysis of hypertexts (as shown in Figure 1). This model retains the reading mode in traditional genre analysis and taking the medium of digital discourse into account by adding the navigating mode to it.

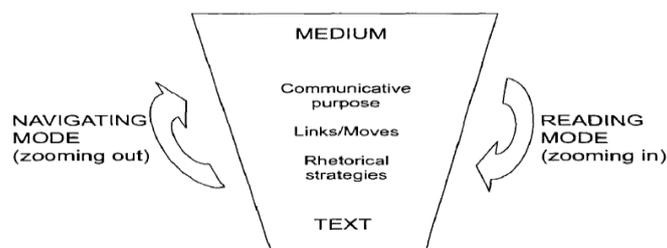


Figure 1. A Two-dimensional Genre Model (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005)

According to this model, genre analysis of all webpages has a two-dimensional feature, namely “reading mode” and “navigating mode”. Similar to the traditional way of reading a printed text, reading mode refers to the sequential reading of a web site, while navigating mode focuses on the navigation possibilities on a webpage. As pointed out by Askehave and Nielsen (2005), the analysis of generic properties of hypermodal discourse involves a three-level analysis of both modes:

in the reading mode, the text must be characterized in terms of its communicative purpose, moves, and rhetorical strategies; and

in the navigating mode, the medium must be characterized in terms of its communicative purpose, links, and rhetorical strategies.

The three levels are interrelated and interdependent. To be specific, rhetorical strategies are a means to realize moves and links (also known as functional units) which in turn aim to achieve the communicative purpose(s) of the discourse.

4. Comparing Chinese and American Corporate Homepages

Due to the “cultural property” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006 p.4) of visual language, we assume that there must be some differences lying between Chinese and American corporate homepages. The two corporate homepages chosen are those of “Tsinghua Professional Manager Training Center” (Tsinghua) and Harvard ManageMentor (Harvard). Tsinghua, established in 1999, is one of the earliest enterprises engaging in senior management training. The company has gained a wide reputation in China because of its cooperation with one of the most prestigious universities in China—Tsinghua University. Harvard, on the other hand, supported by Harvard Business School, provides multilingual top leadership learning resources for professionals in America as well as some other countries. Since both of them are engaged in professionals’ training in workplace, both having the longest history thus share similar level of prestige in China and America respectively, they can well represent the

status quo of the corporate homepage designing in this line in China and the US respectively.

4.1 Comparison of Communicative Purposes

4.1.1 Communicative Purposes in the Reading Mode

The importance of communicative purpose has been acknowledged by a number of discourse analysts, who hold that “it is communicative purpose which brings any genre into being, shaping the ‘schematic’, or ‘beginning-middle-end’ structure of the discourse, and influencing choices of content and style” (Marti, 1984, 1989; Swales, 1990; cf. Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). Based on this assumption, it is communicative purpose that governs the schematic structure as well as the content and style of a genre, making it distinct from other genres.

Under the reading mode, both Tsinghua and Harvard take full advantage of multimodal resources to achieve “one primary and three secondary” communicative purposes. Since both of them provide professional training programs to make a profit, they are typical profit-oriented businesses. As a result, being the crucial component of their websites, their homepages undoubtedly serve as one of the most important channels for publicizing and marketing. This commercial nature determines their primary communicative purpose is “promotion”. According to System Theory, purpose can be divided into primary purpose and secondary purpose, with all secondary purposes being governed by the primary purpose (Liao, 2005). Accordingly, the primary purpose “promotion” needs to be fulfilled by the following three secondary purposes, namely building positive corporate image, introducing the company and stimulating purchasing desire among the potential consumers. The three secondary communicative purposes are interrelated and interdependent with each other, because only by establishing a positive image of the company will visitors be willing to go on reading the information offered on the homepage, which will in turn greatly contribute to generating purchasing desires among potential customers.

4.1.2 Communicative Purpose in the Navigating Mode

According to Askehave & Nielsen (2005), a homepage serves as the official gateway for it enables visitors to get access to the web site by providing navigational tools or links that branch off into the web site as a whole. Therefore, in the navigating mode, the major communicative purpose is to offer access to relevant pages and web sites for navigators. Since the information capacity of the homepage is very limited, it can only display the condensation of the most important information. Thus, hypertext links on the homepage are necessary for providing rich accesses to detailed information that cannot be displayed on the homepage. In terms of hyperlinks, both Tsinghua and Harvard provide a wide variety of hyperlinks to cater for various interests and needs of different navigators so as to attract the attention of potential customers with an aim to promote the sales of their training programs and services.

In summary, the commercial nature of the two companies determines their consistency in both modes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Communicative Purposes

Communicative purposes	Reading mode	Navigating mode
Primary purpose	To promote sales	To provide access to
Secondary purposes	To construct positive image To introduce the company To stimulate purchasing desire	the web site

4.2 Comparison of Functional Units (moves and links)

Functional units refer to the moves in the reading mode and links in the navigating mode respectively. Moves are important for realizing communicative purposes in the reading mode, while links in navigating mode.

4.2.1 Moves in the Reading Mode

As mentioned above, a genre is highly schematic-structured. The schematic structure refers to the conventional moves or the move structure of a particular genre by which the communicative purposes are fulfilled. Therefore, the division of each move is based on the classification of communicative purposes. According to Eggins (1994), each move typically consists of several functionally distinct steps and each step contributes to a part of the overall meanings (p.36). Since the communicative purposes of the two corporations are identical, move structures of the two homepages in the reading mode are also highly similar as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Move Structure

Tsinghua	Harvard
Move 1—Identifying identity	Move 1—Identifying identity
Step 1: corporate name and its logo	Step 1: corporate name and its logo
Move 2—Attracting attention	Move 2—Attracting attention
Step 1: flashing pictures	Step 1: a video clip
Step 2: an advertising slogan	
Move 3—Offering information	Move 3—Offering information
Step 1: main menu	Step 1: a company profile
Step 2: four types of programs	Step 2: main menu
	Step 3: sub-menu
	Step 4: target audience analysis, etc.
Move 4—Encouraging participation	Move 4—Encouraging participation
Step 1: online registration	Step 1: download document
Step 2: online consultation	Step 2: request contact
Step 3: audition application	Step 3: email
Step 4: hotline	
Move 5—Promoting an external organization	Move 5—Establishing a discourse community
Tsinghua University	Facebook
School of Continuing Education	Twitter
Language, Tsinghua University	LinkedIn
	YouTube

As shown above, similarities are greater than differences between the two homepages in terms of their move structures. On the one hand, the schematic structure consists of five moves, with the first four moves identical and the last different. On the other hand, almost all moves of both homepages have deployed more than one step to provide more detailed information to accomplish their corresponding communicative purposes.

To be more specific, moves 1 and 2 aim to achieve the secondary communicative purpose of creating a positive image among visitors by identifying the corporate identity and by employing rich modal resources to attract visitors' attention. By doing so, identity and trust between navigators and the corporate is well established. Identity and trust are the basic components of the reputation-building process (Gatti, 2011). Generally, once a positive image is built, visitors are willing to know more about the corporate. So, move 3 directs to introducing the company through offering some key information to cater for visitors' needs. By displaying a range of topics on the menu(s) and a brief introduction to the programs that are to be promoted, a panoramic picture about the company is unfolded. Move 4 targets to stimulate potential consumers' purchasing desire. A variety of steps are provided to get in touch with the companies under discussion respectively. Move 5 is a supplementation and intensification of move 4. In move 5, Tsinghua provides links to Tsinghua University and School of Continuing Education, Tsinghua University, enabling potential students to be endowed with a sense of honor and pride of being "Tsinghua students", which will further stimulate the potential customers to join in. Harvard, on the other hand, provides links to all mainstream social networks with an aim to establish a virtual discourse community for potential customers to exchange their ideas about Harvard freely. As an important marketing channel, the discourse community offers a platform for potential customers to know more about Harvard, thus definitely help further enhance its influence so as to arouse the potential customers' desire to join in.

As clearly shown above, in the reading mode, each move has its own mission which intends to achieve the secondary communicative purpose, and all moves work together as an integrated part to achieve the primary purpose of "promotion".

4.2.2 Links in the Navigating Mode

A link refers to a clickable object which allows the navigator to go from one place to another on a web site (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005). It functions as equivalent to "moves" in the reading mode, which aims to realize the communicative purpose in the navigating mode. Indicators for links on a homepage can be verbal, visual or a combination of the two. Verbal indicators refer to plain text and visual photos, video, a change of font or color. A combination of verbal and visual resources is often a signal of information prominence. According to the gradient salience of information, navigation contents can be classified into primary and secondary links. The primary links are those clickable items appearing in the center of the website, dominating the focal part of the homepage, while the secondary links refers to those very general topic categories, offering complementary information for the primary links. The primary and secondary links constitute an information continuum, with the former governs the latter and the latter reinforces the former.

With regard to the links, both homepages of Tsinghua and Harvard are mainly verbal ones. On the homepage of Tsinghua, for example, the primary links consist of two parts which are arranged vertically; one is a photo and the other major products offered by the company (see Figure 2). The primary links appear in the middle of the homepage which take up almost 70% space of the homepage; while, the primary links on the homepage of Harvard are richer than that on Tsinghua, which includes a company profile and a video clip, and they are arranged horizontally (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. Primary Links in Tsinghua

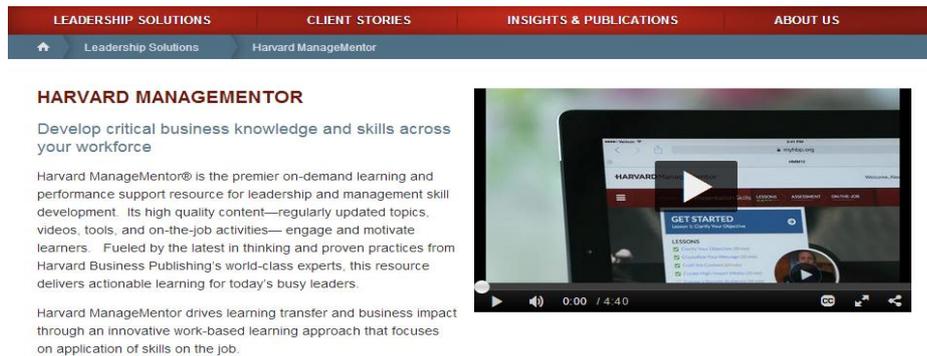


Figure 3. Primary Links in Harvard

4.3 Comparison of Rhetorical Strategies

Even though the schematic structures of the two homepages are highly similar, there still room for rhetorical variation. As suggested by Askehave & Nielsen (2005), one of the most interesting findings is to explore the “common repertoire” of rhetorical strategies. Rhetorical strategy refers to the way semiotic resources are employed to realize moves in the reading mode as well as links in the navigating mode. It is worth noting that despite their great similarities in both functional units and communicative purposes, Tsinghua and Harvard manifest significant differences in rhetorical strategies.

4.3.1 Rhetorical Strategies in the Reading Mode

Rhetorical strategy can reflect different compositional preferences of homepages in different cultures. In the reading mode, rhetorical strategy is usually realized by a combination of

verbal and visual resources. In this part, we shall only compare the rhetorical strategies employed in move 1 and 2 covering “identifying corporate identity” and “attracting attention” in detail, leaving other moves for later research. Move 1 and 2 aim to fulfill the purpose of establishing a positive corporate image among visitors, thus they are very important because they determine whether potential customers are willing to stay on the homepage and continue to know more about the corporation, and therefore indirectly determines the realization of the primary communicative purpose.

In move 1, the homepage of Tsinghua consists of a vibrant logo in red in the upper left corner as well as the company’s name “Tsinghua Professional Managers Training Center” (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Logo and Name of Tsinghua

Move 2 includes three flashing photos (see Figure 5) and a catchy slogan (see Figure 6). The three flashing photos cycling at the center of the homepage, each pauses for three seconds. The first group photo demonstrates leaders of the National Federation of Industry and Commerce are paying a visit to the center, revealing the center has gained recognition from the authoritative institution. The other two are about group activities, manifesting a sense of vitality and harmony among the clients.

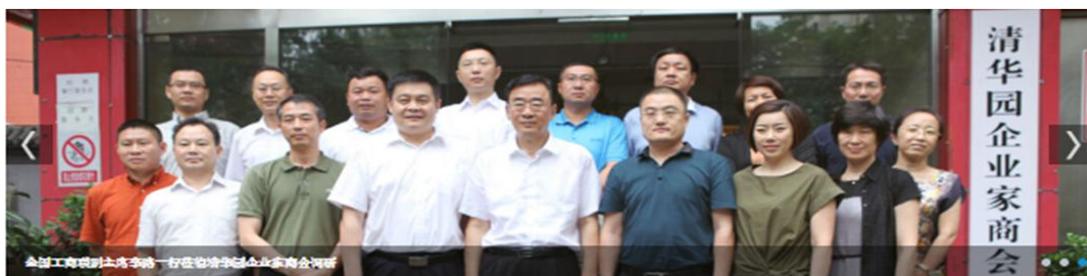


Figure 5. Three Flashing Photos on the Homepage of Tsinghua

In addition, an eye-catching advertising slogan “the first brand of professional managers training in Tsinghua” emphasizes the social status and qualification of the center, with an aim to attract the attention of potential customers (see Figure 6). Apart from these, the homepage of Tsinghua fails to offer substantive information.



Figure 6. The slogan in the homepage of Tsinghua

On the other hand, Harvard’s homepage is composed of a vibrant icon, a video clip and a company profile (see Figure 7, 8, 9 respectively). Like that of Tsinghua, the icon of Harvard is also placed at the upper left corner, as the identifier of the company. The company profile and the video are located in the center of the homepage indicating their important status to the homepage. The company profile describes what the company is about in a third person narrative tone, showing objectivity. The whole video takes seeds cultivation as the conceptual metaphor running through, aiming to tell the potential customers that Harvard will nurture with love and wisdom any employee who wants to be equipped with excellent leadership. The video also includes information about the courses, forms of learning and their clients’ experiences as well as their feedback. Lasting for 4 minutes and 40 seconds, and with light music as background, the video reveals a friendly, positive and pleasant touch.



Figure 7. Logo and Name of Harvard



Figure 8. Company Profile of Harvard



Figure 9. Video Clip of Harvard

4.3.2 Rhetorical Strategies in the Navigating Mode

Navigation is crucial to the design of webpages (Jones, 2007), and it is materialized via four types of semiotic resources: plain text, icon, button or a combination of any two resources. The majority in both Tsinghua and Harvard homepages are plain text, but they differ mainly in two aspects. One is the quantity of the clickable items, and the other is the navigating path. As to the quantity of clickable items, Harvard offers 27 items which is slightly more than that of Tsinghua which has only 23 items. This suggests Harvard provide richer information than Tsinghua (see Table 3). In addition, the navigating path is also different, because Harvard adopts a left-right pattern, highlighting the company profile and the video; while Tinghua adopts a top-down navigating path, highlighting the three flashing photos and the four types of programs.

Table 3. Comparison of navigation styles

Clickable items	Tinghua	Harvard
Total	100% (23)	100% (27)
Plain text	52% (12)	56% (15)
Icon	9% (2)	22% (6)
Button	4% (1)	22% (6)
Combination	35% (8)	0

5. A Socio-cultural Interpretation of the Differences

As illustrated above, significant differences between Chinese and American corporate homepages mainly lie in rhetorical strategies. Undoubtedly, these differences are a mirror of the two distinct cultures, and a good understanding of the causes of these differences can definitely enhance intercultural communication competence.

5.1 Collectivism and Individualism

Part 4.3.1 demonstrates that Tsinghua's homepage highlights a strong sense of collectivism while the content of the video on Harvard's homepage shows an obvious tendency for individual leadership cultivation. This difference can be explained by Hofstede's (1991, 2010) Cultural Dimension Theory. According to this theory, individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose, while collectivism, being contrary to individualism, pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010 p.92). Chinese culture has a strong "collectivism" tendency, which combines with the profound Confucian culture, valuing the harmonious social relations greatly; while western culture advocates "individualism", highly valuing self-struggle, self-reliance and self-realization. By comparing the three photos in Tinghua with the video in Harvard, it is evident that the three group photos managed to create a harmonious relationship with the authoritative institution as well as the clients; while Harvard attaches more importance to personal leadership fostering, for there are many individual growing cases after taking Harvard ManagerMentor courses. Obviously, different cultural dimensions have a great impact on the homepage design.

5.2 High-context Culture and Low Context Culture

As revealed in 4.3.2, it can be concluded that one of the largest differences between the two lies in the amount of information provided on the homepages. To be specific, Harvard provides denser information than that of Tsinghua, which is determined by different context culture. According to American anthropologist Hall (1976), China as well as most Asian countries belong to high context cultures while America and most western countries low context cultures. In high context cultures, much of the meaning is implied because people have much common background due to their similar experiences and expectations. While in low context culture, meanings are supposed to be made explicit because people don't share much in common. As a result, differences in context culture of the two countries greatly influence the design of the two homepages.

5.3 Degrees of Marketization

The different degrees of "marketization" (Fairclough, 1993) also contribute to the differences of the two homepages. Harvard is much more marketized than Tsinghua. The different degrees in marketization involvement between them mainly manifest in the following two aspects: on the one hand, the degree of international marketization involvement varies. Harvard's homepage states that their courses are available in five languages to meet the needs of target customers from different countries. Tsinghua's homepage, however, even does not provide its corresponding English version, and there is no sign of providing courses in other languages, either. This indicates that their target customers are Chinese only, thus it is more local in orientation. On the other hand, the domestic marketization involvement degree also varies. Harvard offers training courses for different levels of professionals, including individuals, managers and leaders; while Tsinghua's training courses mainly target at senior managers and presidents. But cases are that senior professionals are relatively fewer, thus the target consumers are largely confined. Obviously, the domestic market is not much marketized for Tsinghua.

With the accelerating process of economic globalization, multinational companies in China are booming, which brings both opportunities and challenges for professional managers training industry. Homepage, as an important channel for promotional campaign, plays an extremely important role, since it is an indispensable source of information for professionals who are seeking leadership improvement. At present, Tsinghua only views Chinese senior professionals as their target consumers, which is obviously inconsistent with the rapid development of the market. Fortunately, Tsinghua has done some modification to their homepage recently by replacing two group photos of their clients with a newly-taken photo showing their cooperation with the US partner (See Figure 10), which suggests the degree of marketization is increasing.



Figure 10. The Latest Photo on the Homepage of Tsinghua

6. Conclusion

This paper, referring to the two-dimensional genre model, compares the homepage of Tsinghua Professional Managers Training Center and Harvard ManageMentor. After analyzing the differences in employing multimodal resources to realize their communicative purposes between the two network marketing discourses, a socio-cultural interpretation was provided. Hopefully, the results of this paper will shed light on effectively designing culturally sensitive web sites in this global economy era.

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