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THE DIGITAL IMAGERY OF SUCCESS: A PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL ON UNIVERSITY WEBSITES

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Abstract. This study examines how universities in Kazakhstan construct and communicate institutional success through their official websites. Drawing on a qualitative discourse analysis of fifteen university websites, the study analyzes how language, imagery, and visuals are used to legitimize institutional positions within the national higher education system. The findings show that universities utilize distinct forms of symbolic capital, including global prestige, state recognition, innovation capacity, and social utility, depending on their position and available resources. Findings revealed that some universities mobilize markers of global excellence and scientific innovation to assert dominance, while others rely on narratives of social utility and local relevance to establish legitimacy. While these strategies vary across institutional types, they reflect and reinforce existing hierarchies. Digital representations normalize inequality by presenting historically and structurally conditioned advantages as natural indicators of merit and quality. The study contributes to research on Kazakhstani higher education by spotlighting university websites as domains of symbolic power and inequality, demonstrating how digital platforms participate in the reproduction of institutional hierarchies within the national education system.

Keywords: symbolic capital; higher education; university website; discourse analysis; university success; institutional legitimacy; perceived success; digital self-presentation; symbolic power.

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ЖЕТІСТІКТІҢ ЦИФРЛЫҚ КӨРІНІСІ: УНИВЕРСИТЕТ САЙТТАРЫНДАҒЫ СИМВОЛДЫҚ КАПИТАЛ ТҰЖЫРЫМДАМАСЫНЫҢ ФИЛОСОФИЯСЫ

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ЦИФРОВОЙ ОБРАЗ УСПЕХА: ФИЛОСОФИЯ СИМВОЛИЧЕСКОГО КАПИТАЛА НА САЙТАХ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеуде авторлар Қазақстандағы университеттердің институционалдық жетістігін өздерінің ресми сайттары арқылы қалай көрсетіп және түсіндіретінін қарастырды. Он бес университеттің сайттарына жүргізілген сапалық дискурс-талдау негізінде тіл, суреттер және визуалды элементтердің жоғары білім беру жүйесінде университеттердің мәртебесі мен сапасы туралы түсінікті қалай қалыптастыратыны талданады. Нәтижелер университеттердің жетістікті әртүрлі жолмен көрсететінін, яғни халықаралық мойындалуға, мемлекеттік қолдауға, инновацияларға және қоғамға қосқан үлесіне сүйенетінін көрсетеді. Зерттеу нәтижелері кейбір университеттердің жаһандық үздіксіздік пен ғылыми инновация көрсеткіштерін пайдалану арқылы өз үстемдігін айқындайтынын, ал басқалары элеуметтік маңыздылық пен жергілікті өзектілік туралы баяндауларға сүйене отырып институционалдық легитимділікті қалыптастыратынын көрсетті. Бұл тәсілдер университеттің орны мен мүмкіндіктеріне байланысты болғанымен, жалпы алғанда университеттер арасындағы бар теңсіздікті бейнелейді. Цифрлық кеңістікте ұсынылған жетістік бейнелері бұл айырмашылықтарды қалыпты ретінде көрсетіп, құрылымдық артықшылықтарды еңбектің және жоғары сапаның нәтижесі ретінде ұсынады. Зерттеу университет сайттарының символдық билік

Аннотация. В данном исследовании авторы рассматривают, как университеты Казахстана представляют и объясняют институциональный успех на своих официальных веб-сайтах. На основе качественного дискурс-анализа сайтов пятнадцати университетов исследуется, каким образом язык, изображения и визуальные элементы используются для формирования представления о статусе и качестве университетов в системе высшего образования. Результаты показывают, что университеты по-разному демонстрируют успех, опираясь на такие ресурсы, как международное признание, государственная поддержка, инновации и вклад в общество. Результаты исследования показали, что некоторые университеты используют глобально признанное качество и научные инновации для демонстрации своего доминирования, в то время как другие опираются на нарративы пользы обществу и местной значимости для установления своего признания. Эти подходы зависят от позиционирования университета и его возможностей. Данные стратегии различаются в зависимости от типа университета, отражают и укрепляют существующие иерархии. Цифровые образы успеха делают эти различия привычными и «естественными», представляя структурные преимущества как результат заслуг и высокого качества. Исследование показывает, что универси-

пен теңсіздікті қалыптастыратын маңызды кеңістік екенін және ұлттық әрі жаһандық жоғары білім беру жүйелеріндегі иерархиялардың қайта өндірілуіне елеулі үлес қосатынын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: символдық капитал; жоғары білім; университет сайты; дискурс-талдау; университеттік жетістік; институционалдық легитимділік; қабылданатын табыстылық; цифрлық өзін-өзі таныстыру; символдық билік

тетские сайты являются важным пространством формирования символической власти и неравенства и играют значительную роль в воспроизводстве иерархий в национальной системе высшего образования.

Ключевые слова: символический капитал, высшее образование, сайт университета, дискурс-анализ, успех университета, институциональная легитимность, воспринимаемый успех, цифровая самопрезентация, символическая власть

Introduction

In the contemporary higher education landscape, universities do not simply compete over material resources and students or fundings, but over the symbolic authority to define what counts as institutional ‘success’. In Kazakhstan, this struggle unfolds in the public digital arena, where official university websites function as key spaces of institutional self-presentation and legitimation. Since gaining national independence, Kazakhstan’s higher education system has undergone a profound transformation shaped by structural restructuring, rapid marketization, and increasing internationalization. Consequently, universities have been repositioned within competitive national and global hierarchies, where institutional visibility, reputation, and rhetorical claims of success have become central to survival and advancement (Hazelkorn, 2015; Naidoo, 2004).

Within this omni-competitive context, official university websites have emerged as strategic communication tools. Websites function as the primary interfaces through which universities depict their missions, achievements, and identities, translating abstract institutional priorities into visible representations (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). At the same time, higher education has been shaped by a broader neoliberal ‘success imperative’, in which institutional worth is quantified and measured through standardized indicators such as rankings, research productivity, international partnerships, innovation capacity, and graduate employability (Marginson, 2006). These indicators shape how success is defined, valued, and recognized across higher education systems, creating pressure for institutions to adapt to global models of excellence.

Despite extensive reforms and internationalization efforts in Kazakhstani higher education, there is a limited understanding of how universities construct and legitimize ‘success’ in the digital space. Existing scholarship has examined reforms, governance changes, rankings, and policy developments in post-Soviet higher education (Chankseliani, 2022; Smolentseva, 2017), yet it has largely overlooked how institutions symbolically perform legitimacy and hierarchy through their official websites. This gap is significant, as websites have become the ‘institutional front stage’ where universities communicate with students, state authorities, and global partners, and where institutional success is publicly displayed and negotiated (Zhang & O’Halloran, 2013).

At the same time, research on university websites has focused predominantly on Western contexts and often treats digital communication primarily as branding or marketing (Chapleo, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Such approaches risk obscuring the role of websites as field-structuring mechanisms through which symbolic capital is accumulated, displayed, and recognized (Bourdieu, 1986). In Kazakhstan, where a post-Soviet system is characterized by an interplay of strong state involvement, rapid marketization, and ambitious internationalization, universities occupy unequal positions within the higher education field (Smolentseva, 2017). Yet these inequalities are rarely examined through the lens of digital symbolic representation, in which institutions must navigate the complex tension between national prestige, state authority, and global legitimacy.

This study addresses this gap by examining how Kazakhstani universities construct symbolic capital through website language, images, and visual strategies, and how these digital performances reflect and reproduce hierarchical positioning within higher education. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic capital, the study treats university websites as active sites of symbolic power, which is exercised through recognition and consent. The purpose of this study is to analyze how institutional success is defined and legitimized through digital representation in Kazakhstan's evolving higher education. The study is guided by the following research question: How do Kazakhstani universities construct and communicate 'success' as symbolic capital through their digital representations?

By addressing this question, the study contributes to several areas of scholarship and practice. First, it advances the understanding of higher education transformation in Kazakhstan by linking neoliberalization, digital communication, and symbolic capital within a non-Western context. Second, it extends research on university websites by moving beyond marketing perspectives to conceptualize websites as mechanisms of symbolic inequality.

Symbolic Capital

Within the neoliberal field of higher education, market-driven reforms have forced universities into a persistent struggle for symbolic capital (Naidoo, 2004). Marginson (2006) observes that this positional competition operates simultaneously on national and global scales, where standardized metrics validate specific forms of prestige. Global rankings have emerged as the primary mechanism for distributing this capital, acting as proxies for quality that reshape how institutions perceive themselves and project their image (Hazelkorn, 2015). Consequently, universities internalize these market-responsive metrics, often marginalizing democratic values in favor of commercial viability (Lynch, 2015).

To understand this dynamic in the Kazakhstani context, this study draws on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, defined as the transmutation of economic and cultural assets into recognized authority and legitimate competence (Bourdieu, 1986). We view the higher education landscape as a field: a structured space of conflict and hierarchy where actors compete for resources (Bourdieu, 1988). In this struggle for positional advantage, the university website emerges as a critical instrument of distinction (Bourdieu & Nice, 1984). Through the curation of visual images and narratives, institutions not only report their status but actively perform it, converting raw data into the symbolic currency required to navigate national and global hierarchies.

Institutional Constructions of Success

The rise of promotional discourse on university websites must be understood within broader processes of marketization and neoliberal governance. Fairclough (1995) and Lynch (2015) argue that higher education institutions increasingly adopt market-oriented language that frames education as a competitive product and success as measurable performance. Rankings, accreditations, employability statistics, and international partnerships become dominant symbolic currencies through which institutional worth is communicated (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Analyses across diverse national contexts demonstrate how these global pressures are localized on university websites. Studies in Pakistan (Naeem, 2022), Saudi Arabia (Al-Qahtani, 2021), Australia (Hoang & Rojas-Lizana, 2015), and China (Xie & Teo, 2020) show that success is consistently constructed through superlative language, quantification, and visual cues associated with modernity and globality. These studies reveal that promotional discourse is stratified: institutions with weaker structural positions tend to rely more heavily on aggressive marketing language and aspirational imagery to compensate for limited access to high-status symbolic capital.

This study conceptualizes 'success' as a socially constructed institutional narrative. Departing from psychological perspectives that view success as individual achievement, we approach it as a rhetorical performance designed to provide legitimacy. In higher education, success is recognized as valuable 'symbolic capital' negotiated through the semiotic resources of the university website.

Websites and Institutional Identity

University websites play a central role in mediating symbolic capital, functioning as active sites of identity construction. Viewed through the lens of Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis, these digital platforms are revealed as spaces where power relations are naturalized. By adopting the promotional language of the market, universities shape idealized identities that selectively foreground achievements while silencing inequalities (Komljenovic, 2019).

This construction of identity relies on the interplay between text and image. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) argue, visual composition constitutes a distinct grammar of meaning, enabling institutions to project authority and prestige through nonverbal cues. Consequently, the website becomes a mechanism for 'cumulative advantage' (Marginson, 2016), in which privileged institutions use superior digital resources to translate their material wealth into visible, persuasive narratives of success.

However, this drive for digital legitimacy creates a paradox. While branding research suggests universities strive for distinctiveness, they often adopt isomorphic representational strategies to align with global norms (Chapleo, 2010; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). In this study, we argue that the university website is the primary stage where this tension plays out: it is where the struggle for 'distinctiveness' clashes with the pressure to align with standardized, global definitions of excellence. In Kazakhstan, where the wealth of human capital is largely determined by the competitiveness and quality of education received (Abdina et al., 2025), this discussion is highly relevant.

Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

Despite extensive scholarship on symbolic capital and the growing oversight of university websites, distinct gaps remain in the literature. First, while Bourdieusian concepts have been widely applied to rankings, admissions, and academic hierarchies (Marginson, 2006; Naidoo, 2004), their application to digital institutional self-representation remains limited. Current website studies often focus on technical branding strategies or surface-level diversity, failing to examine how symbolic capital is constructed and performed in digital spaces.

Second, much of the empirical research focuses on Western contexts, leaving the unique dynamics of the post-Soviet region relatively underexamined. Analytical models created for stable Western markets might not entirely reflect the complex blend of influences in Eurasia, where neoliberal reforms coexist with persistent state power (Osipian, 2017). While emerging research in Kazakhstan has begun to address this, such as Tatyeva and Zagidullina's (2020) analysis of organizational identity and Abuova et al.'s (2024) review of website content, these studies remain descriptive. They document what universities communicate (marketing language, international symbols) but stop short of theorizing how these representations relate to structures of symbolic power and inequality.

This study addresses these theoretical and empirical gaps to examine the 'digital imagery of success' in Kazakhstan. By moving beyond a descriptive analysis of website features, we demonstrate how institutions negotiate the complex tensions between local priorities and global rankings, revealing how the digital sphere functions as a site where the hierarchy of higher education is both contested and solidified.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how Kazakhstani universities construct and communicate 'success' as symbolic capital. The methodological framework integrates Bourdieu's (1988) concept of the field with Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of discourse. This approach enables a systematic analysis of how institutional legitimacy is produced not only through text (lexical choices and rhetoric) but also through visual semiotics (layout, color, and imagery), interpreting these choices as strategic moves.

The study analyzes the official websites of fifteen Kazakhstani universities, selected through purposive stratified sampling to capture the structural diversity of the national higher education landscape. To ensure representativeness across the hierarchy, institutions were categorized into five distinct field positions (see Appendix 1 for characteristics). Flagship universities occupy the apex of the field, combining historical prestige, stronger state support, expanded research capacity, and international ambitions. Regional comprehensive universities are state institutions serving geographically dispersed populations with broad program offerings. Specialized universities focus on particular disciplinary or professional domains. Private universities operate outside the state sector and rely on market-based legitimation strategies. International branch campuses represent foreign universities offering transnational degrees and direct access to Western credentials. This typology enables systematic comparison across institutional positions and illuminates how symbolic capital strategies vary according to field location.

Data collection was conducted between November 2025 and January 2026. The study has used publicly available data, which does not require institutional review board approval in accordance with the institution's policies. The primary unit of analysis was the English-language version of each university's website. This methodological choice posits that English serves as the central language of the global academic field (de Swaan, 2001), therefore, the quality and content of the English site function as a proxy for the institution's aspirational position and its capacity to leverage global symbolic capital. Where English content was fragmented, Russian and Kazakh versions were consulted to verify context. For each institution, data were captured from the following pages: the Homepage and strategic sub-pages, including About Us, Rankings, Research, and International Cooperation, Accreditation, and Our Alumni.

Data analysis proceeded through an iterative, three-stage coding process aligned with Fairclough's (1995) model:

Textual analysis (description): we coded lexical choices and rhetorical strategies. Key codes included: the use of superlatives (e.g., world-class, leading, elite) and temporal markers of legacy (e.g., 90th anniversary, oldest), the use of statistics, and the framing of identity through spatial markers (e.g., 'British model', 'cultural bridge').

Discursive practice (interpretation): we analyzed how the texts were produced, specifically looking at how universities appropriate external voices (rankings agencies, accreditation bodies) to validate their claims. This included citations of: rankings (QS, Times Higher Education World rankings) and accreditations (AMBA, ABET, AACSB, EFMD, QAA), presidential congratulations or government initiatives, and the visual prominence of partner university logos.

Visual analysis (sociological analysis): we analyzed images as objectified symbolic capital. We coded for the social values performed by visual elements: the use of high-tech imagery (labs, robotics, futuristic architecture) to signal alignment with global scientific norms, the use of national symbols (monuments, yurts, costumes) to signal historical authority, and the placement of Western partner logos or accreditation badges to borrow authority.

By triangulating these textual and visual codes, the analysis revealed the specific 'strategies of distinction' universities employ to negotiate their position within national and global hierarchies.

Findings

The analysis of fifteen Kazakhstani university websites reveals patterns in how institutions deploy symbolic capital according to their position within the higher education field. These patterns reflect Bourdieu's (1988) field theory, where actors' strategies correspond to their structural positions and available resources.

Global Prestige Capital

Across the sample, universities construct success through the accumulation of global prestige capital. We observe that institutions utilize specific symbolic markers, including international accreditations, English-language dominance, and global research metrics (citations per faculty, h-indexes), to position themselves within the hierarchy. However, the nature of this capital varies by field position.

For Flagship Universities, success is constructed exclusively through knowledge production. Their websites utilize prestige vocabulary such as 'world-class', 'research-intensive', and

'autonomous'. Textual analysis reveals that these institutions rely on scientific discourse to claim authority, showing 'innovation ecosystems' and 'publications in high-impact journals' above other metrics. Visually, this positioning is reinforced by images of futuristic architecture and high-tech laboratories (as seen in Flagship 1) or by prominent displays of '90 years of excellence' (Flagship 2). Here, the visual discourse signals that the university is a producer of global knowledge and national role models, distinct from the teaching-focused institutions.

In contrast, Regional Universities, lacking the resources to generate research capital, utilize a strategy of associational leverage. Success is defined by who it knows. For example, Regional University 1 displays the logo of a Western partner university (UK-based) on its homepage carousel. Discursively, the text shifts from 'scientific discovery' to 'international cooperation', highlighting 'dual-degree programs' and 'academic mobility'. As Marginson (2006) suggests, these partnerships allow peripheral institutions to 'borrow' legitimacy. The visual prominence of foreign logos signals that local status is dependent on proximity to a Western 'center'.

Private Universities operate outside the traditional state hierarchy. To compensate, they construct a 'market-oriented' form of prestige capital. Analysis of Private University 1 reveals a reliance on international accreditation badges (AMBA, ACBSP), which serve as visual guarantees of quality. The textual discourse here aligns with an 'American model', emphasizing 'English-medium instruction', 'leadership', and 'career transformation'. Unlike Flagship universities, which signal scientific authority, Private universities signal professional authority, positioning themselves as gateways to the labor market.

The English language functions as a mechanism of distinction. While all websites provide an English version, the linguistic capital displayed varies. Flagship 1 and Private 1 offer fully functional, native-level English interfaces, positioning themselves as active participants in the global market of higher education. Conversely, Regional and Specialized institutions often present limited or translation-heavy English content. In these cases, English operates as a signal of aspiration rather than a functional tool. The presence of the 'EN' button asserts a desire for global inclusion, even if the underlying content remains locally focused.

State Recognition Capital

A second form of symbolic capital, distinct from global prestige, is state recognition. While neoliberal reforms encourage market-oriented competition, our analysis confirms that political authority remains a primary source of legitimacy in the Kazakhstani higher education. Success is discursively constructed through proximity to the state and historical service to the nation.

The blend of legitimation strategies is most visible among National Universities. For Flagship 2 University, success is framed through the accumulation of historical capital. The website foregrounds a '90th anniversary' and presents it as a major national event. The homepage features a section titled 'Congratulations of the Head of State'. By visually centering the President's endorsement, the university derives its authority from the state. This reflects what Smolentseva (2017) identifies as a distinctively post-Soviet mode of legitimation: a hybrid model where neoliberal metrics are layered onto Soviet-era structures of state patronage.

National 1 constructs a specific geopolitical identity, utilizing terms like 'Eurasian integration' and 'cultural bridge'. Here, symbolic capital is generated by aligning the university's mission with the state's foreign policy ideology (Eurasianism). Similarly, Regional University 2 emphasizes 'regional development' and 'service to the Altai region'. For these institutions, success is discursively constructed as social utility. Instead of competing in the global rankings

game, they legitimize their existence through a narrative of local economic contribution and cultural preservation.

The chase of global ambition and national duty creates a semiotic tension on the websites. We observed a recurring visual pattern where 'global' signifiers (QS Ranking badges, English text) are combined with 'national' signifiers (images of the President, ornaments, or monuments). For instance, on the website of Flagship 2, news about an 'Artificial Intelligence hub' is positioned directly beside news about 'Spiritual Revival' (Rukhani Zhangyru). This visual dissonance materializes the structural contradiction of the field: universities must perform modernity to attract funding and international partners, while simultaneously performing national loyalty to maintain political protection and state status.

All three international branches (Branches 1, 2, and 3) of universities construct their institutional prestige through the importation of symbolic capital, strategically positioning UK affiliation and English-medium instruction as visual markers of global excellence rather than cultivating homegrown academic distinction, collectively illustrating how transnational higher education positioning relies on assembling internationally recognizable legitimacy markers that visibly project competitiveness while invisibly sustaining inequality.

Innovation Capital

A third form of symbolic capital is innovation capacity. Universities increasingly construct success by emphasizing technological leadership, digital transformation, and future-oriented modernity. This strategy functions to signal alignment with both the global knowledge economy and the Kazakhstani state's modernization agenda.

For Flagship Universities, innovation is framed as a systemic capability. Analysis of Flagship 1 reveals a reliance on the discourse of the 'ecosystem'. The website highlights an 'Innovation Cluster' and 'Technopark', positioning the university as a producer of new technology. Similarly, Flagship 2 integrates 'AI' and 'Robotics' into its core identity. Its navigation structure includes sections such as the 'University Hub' and initiatives such as 'AI-Sana'. By spatially privileging these high-tech centers on the homepage, the university constructs a narrative of scientific sovereignty, claiming that it is a modern scientific powerhouse. In contrast, Specialized Universities construct innovation capital through a lens of market utility and digital speed. The website of Specialized 1 creates a distinct technocratic aesthetic. Visually, it favors 'coding environments', 'hackathons', and youthful student imagery. Textually, the discourse shifts to 'startup ecosystems', 'Big Data', and 'Smart Cities'.

Across groups, visual discourse plays a critical role in objectifying this capital. We observed a consistent use of technological props as symbols of legitimacy. Medical Universities utilize the high-definition images of students using advanced mannequins or surgical robots. Technical Universities highlight laboratory equipment as the main focus of the image. These objects function as institutionalized cultural capital. They provide visual proof that the university possesses the material resources required to deliver modern education. By foregrounding this infrastructure, institutions distract from potential deficits in other areas (such as rankings) and stake their claim to legitimacy on grounds of infrastructural superiority.

Social Utility Capital

A final form of symbolic capital, dominant among regional and private institutions, is social utility. In the absence of high-status research metrics or historical prestige, these universities construct success by emphasizing practical value: graduate employability, regional economic service, and financial aid and student support. This strategy positions the university as an engine of social mobility and stability.

Regional universities lack the aura of an established reputation. To compensate, they employ an aggressive quantification strategy. Analysis of Regional University 2 reveals a heavy reliance on numerical rhetoric to render success visible. The website highlights specific counts: '112 Educational Programs', '10 Double Degree Programs', and '98% Employment'. Unlike flagship universities, which use abstract qualitative terms ('excellence'), regional institutions use numbers to demonstrate their worth. This is a strategy of the periphery: lacking the symbolic power to claim quality, they must count it. The statistics function as a substitute for prestige.

For Private Universities and market-oriented specialized schools, success is defined by labor market outcomes. The discourse here is neoliberal (Lynch, 2015), framing education as a financial investment. We observed terms like 'career transformation', 'entrepreneurship', and 'practical education'. Visually, the 'Career Center' is often given higher navigational prominence than the library or research centers. By highlighting '98% employability', these institutions legitimize themselves through market responsiveness, signaling to students and families that the degree has an exchange value in the economy.

Finally, while flagship websites showcase 'innovation hubs', regional websites highlight 'comfortable student houses' and 'dormitory construction'. For example, news items at Regional University 1 celebrate the 'construction of five dormitories' as a major victory. This emphasis addresses the habitus of their target demographic, often students from rural or lower-income backgrounds, for whom accommodation is a decisive factor. By visually foregrounding canteens and dormitories, these universities convert material resources into symbolic capital of care. Success, in this context, is constructed as the ability to provide a safe, stable environment for social reproduction.

Discussion

This study examined how Kazakhstani universities construct and communicate institutional success through their official websites. The findings demonstrate that these digital representations are active mechanisms through which symbolic capital is displayed, differentiated, and recognized. As Saichaie and Morphew (2014) argue, university websites function as sites of symbolic violence, where institutional hierarchies are digitally produced, normalized, and misrecognized as objective differences in academic quality rather than in funding. Even though websites allow for 'symbolic maneuvering', they rarely alter the underlying distribution of power because they remain embedded in these rigid field structures.

The digital reproduction of inequality. Our analysis shows that the digital space operates as a mirror of the material field, reproducing what Stich and Reeves (2016) describe as 'class-based academic capital'. Institutions with privileged access to economic and cultural resources (Flagship Universities) present these advantages as self-evident markers of merit. By foregrounding innovation ecosystems and global rankings, they naturalize the idea that elite status results from superior intellect rather than funding. Regional and Specialized institutions, lacking these resources, are compelled to define success in terms of 'social utility' and 'employability'. This strategy creates a mechanism of misrecognition: the structural underfunding of regional universities is reframed as a 'choice' to focus on practical training. The website, therefore, codifies a stratified symbolic system where some universities are authorized to embody the global knowledge enterprise (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013), while others are confined to providing basic educational services.

The limits of symbolic capital without material foundations. Consistent with Bourdieu's field theory, our data demonstrates that websites reflect underlying distributions of power. Symbolic strategies cannot produce capital where material, political, and academic foundations are absent. Regional universities attempting to mimic the visual language of flagships risk exposing their deficit rather than masking it. For instance, using generic stock photography of laboratories without the accompanying research output creates a hollow signifier of modernity. Thus, the website serves as a digital register of existing constraints.

Hybridity in the Eurasian context. Perhaps the most significant finding is the form of resistance emerging in the Kazakhstani context. Unlike Western contexts, where global rankings often serve as the currency of value, Kazakhstani flagship universities deploy a hybrid legitimation strategy. By juxtaposing the 'QS Ranking Badge' (Global Capital) with the 'Presidential Congratulations' (State Capital), these institutions attempt to negotiate a third way. This reflects the legacy of the Soviet model, where the university remains embedded in state-building projects despite neoliberal reforms (Chankseliani, 2022; Ibrayeva & Bekmagambetov, 2025). We observe a complex semiotic layering: the university uses its national authority to shield itself from marketization, while using its global metrics to justify its state funding. However, this resistance remains constrained. Without recognized international publications and accreditations, the reliance on state recognition remains a strategic necessity for survival in a global market (Marginson, 2006).

This study demonstrates that university websites are active tools through which academic hierarchies are reproduced. While they offer spaces for symbolic maneuvering, they remain embedded within field structures that limit transformative potential.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations in this research should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses on official university websites, which capture institutional self-presentations. We analyzed the projection of symbolic capital, not its actual possession. The images of 'innovation ecosystems' on a website may mask material shortages. Future research could triangulate website analysis with interviews and observational data to examine the gap between the image and the reality, investigating how this dissonance impacts faculty habitus and student expectations.

Second, the methodological decision to focus on English-language content introduces a limitation. This study may overlook nuances in domestic strategies across the Kazakh and Russian-language versions. Future studies could conduct a comparative linguistic analysis to map how universities code-switch their symbolic capital.

Third, university websites are dynamic artifacts. The analysis captures a specific temporal moment (late 2025 - early 2026). Longitudinal research is needed to trace how symbolic capital strategies evolve in real-time. For instance, how Flagship universities adjust their digital narratives in response to changes in national leadership or fluctuations in global ranking methodologies.

Finally, we analyzed how universities transmit signals of success, but we know little about how these signals are interpreted by prospective students, parents, and employers. Do students actually need the narrative of 'world-classness' or do they prioritize the social utility capital of local institutions?

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that university websites in Kazakhstan function as far more than administrative portals or marketing tools. They are active instruments of distinction through which the hierarchy of higher education is produced and negotiated. Our analysis reveals that the digital sphere mirrors the material inequalities of the field, serving as a site where institutional power is displayed, legitimized, and often misrecognized.

The findings indicate that the digital imagery of ‘success’ is stratified. While Flagship Universities mobilize the capital of Global Prestige and Scientific Innovation to assert authority, Regional and Private institutions are compelled to rely on Social Utility. This divergence confirms that digital representation does not democratize the field. Instead, it reproduces symbolic violence, in which flagship institutions naturalize their privilege through the aesthetics of ‘world-class’ science, while regional institutions prove their relevance through employment statistics and service narratives.

This study illuminates the unique hybridity of the post-Soviet Eurasian context. We observed a semiotic tension in which neoliberal markers of success are layered onto post-Soviet-era logics of state recognition. This performance suggests that Kazakhstani universities must navigate a complex dual legitimacy. They are required to look West for academic capital while looking inward for political survival.

By foregrounding these dynamics, this study demonstrates that the neoliberalization of higher education is a visual and discursive project. While digital platforms offer universities a stage for symbolic maneuvering, they remain embedded within rigid field structures. The university website may reshape the narrative of success, but without shifts in resources and research capacity, it rarely alters the underlying distribution of power within the system.

APPENDIX 1

Table 1: University characteristics

Type	Location	Funding	Key Rankings/ Accreditations	Website Languages
Flagship 1	Astana	Autonomous	QS World 295 (2025); ABET, AMBA accredited	English, Kazakh, Russian
Flagship 2	Almaty	State	QS World 801-1000; 90 years history; Presidential recognition	English, Kazakh, Russian
Flagship 3	Astana	State	National ranking leader in social sciences	Limited English, Kazakh, Russian
Regional 1	Karaganda	State	Regional comprehensive	Limited English, Kazakh, Russian
Regional 2	Aktobe	State	QS ranking participant; Heriot-Watt partnership	English, Kazakh, Russian
Regional 3	Oskemen	State	112 programs; 10 double degrees; 98% employment	English, Kazakh, Russian

Specialized/ Technical 1	Almaty	Private-State partnership	British model; engineering focus	English, Kazakh, Russian
Specialized/ Medical 2	Almaty	State	Oldest medical school; WHO recognition	English, Kazakh, Russian
Specialized/ IT 3	Astana	State	Technology focus; industry partnerships	English, Kazakh, Russian
Private 1	Almaty	Private	AMBA, ACBSP accredited; American model	English, Kazakh, Russian, Chinese
Private 2	Almaty region	Private (Turkish partnership)	Turkish-Kazakh joint international orientation	English, Kazakh, Russian, Turkish
Private 3	Astana	Private	Business and technology focus	English, Kazakh, Russian
International Branch 1	Astana	International franchise	UK Quality Assurance Agency validated	English primarily
International Branch 2	Almaty	International franchise	British degree programs	English primarily
International Branch 3	Almaty	International franchise	UK curriculum delivery	English primarily

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