PROMOTING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH IN ACADEMIA: AN INVESTIGATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES SECTIONS ON BRITISH AND AMERICAN UNIVERSITY WEBSITES

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Abstract: Mental health concerns among university populations are on the rise. Faculty and students report increasing levels of depression, stress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Starting from this assumption, the study is a preliminary investigation aimed at exploring students' well-being in a selection of the world's top universities. In particular, counselling services sections devoted to the promotion of students' mental health on a sample of websites of British and American universities included in the World University Rankings will be explored in order to investigate their commitment to improve students' well-being. The methodology draws from studies on multimodality and social semiotics. The preliminary outcomes of this study seem to confirm a different multimodal perspective promoted by the UK and USA universities in terms of less or more proximity with which the counselling services engage with the students.

Keywords: well-being; multimodal investigation; cross-cultural perspective.

1. Introduction

According to a survey by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, which is aimed at advancing the mission of higher education, mental health concerns among university populations are increasing[1]. Faculty and students report growing levels of depression, stress, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. In particular, nearly 90% of counselling center directors on college campuses denounced a continually increasing number of students on campus with severe psychological problems.

Conversely, it has been proved that students who are prepared and able to adapt to the changes that moving into higher education involves also experience better mental health. Poor mental health is often associated to a lack of engagement both with learning and leisure activities and poor mental health literacy. Specifically, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the concept of well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative ones (e.g. depression or anxiety), satisfaction, fulfillment, and positive functioning (Andrews and Withey 1976; CDC 2018; Diener 2000). In short, a review of observational investigations measuring factors associated with student mental well-being and poor mental health (Campbell *et al.* 2022) revealed that the promotion of well-being includes developing strong and supportive social networks while keeping a positive attitude towards life.

Student well-being is foundational to academic success (Leshner and Sherer 2021). The CDC and other leading public health organizations state that it includes mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, social, financial, and other dimensions that, individually and collectively, impact a variety of outcomes of concern to colleges and universities. In other words, student well-being is not only about having happy students. A large body of research has shown that mental health challenges significantly affect academic achievement and graduation rates in postsecondary education (Mojtabai *et al.* 2015).

Starting from these premises, this preliminary research focuses on a corpus including the counselling service sections of 6 UK and US-based universities from the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2023. The latter features 1,799 universities across 104 countries and regions, making them the largest and most diverse university rankings to date[2]. Table 1 below shows the six universities under scrutiny:

Table 1. Universities under scrutiny

UK	USA
University of Oxford	Harvard University
University of Cambridge	Stanford University
Imperial College of London	Massachusetts Institute of Technology

As shown in the Rankings, the universities from the UK context are in the first, third and tenth place, whereas the ones from the USA context are in the second, fourth and fifth place. The rationale behind the choice of these universities was the intention to investigate the actual commitment of the best universities in the world to mental well-being, also from a cross-cultural perspective. The low number of universities under scrutiny can be explained with the intention to provide an in-depth investigation adopting a multimodal perspective. In the future, the corpus could be enlarged in order to provide more comparable data.

The study will try to answer two main research questions: 1) What are the main multimodal tools found on the university websites to promote their counselling services? 2) What kind of preliminary observations can be provided in terms of cross-cultural differences in the UK and USA university contexts?

2. Methodology

Some previous studies concerning cultural implications characterising websites focused on descriptive ("what is there to be found") and interpretative ("what could it possibly tells us about aspects of culture") approaches, which included the possibility to infer cultural features from a multimodal perspective. In particular, according to Pauwels (2012), cultural features are represented by some categories such as "Salient features and Topics", "In-depth Analysis of Content and Formal choices", "Information of organization and spatial priming strategies", among others (Pauwels 2012: 256).

In this study, the attention will be devoted to an "In-depth Analysis of Content and Formal choices", where the relationships between images and written texts are explored. In order to offer a more detailed investigation concerning this specific point, the chosen methodology includes both a systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis (Halliday 1978, 1985; Wignell *et al.* 2018; Jewitt *et al.* 2016; O' Toole 2011) and a social semiotics approach (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Drawing on Halliday's (1978) metafunctions of language, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) define the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual metafunctions as follows. The ideational is any semiotic mode which is able "(…) to represent aspects of the world as experienced by humans" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 42). The interpersonal metafunction is–any semiotic mode which "(…) has to be able to project the relations between the producer of a (complex) sign, and the receiver/reproducer of that sign (…)" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 42). Finally, the textual metafunction is any semiotic mode which creates texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 43). According to more recent studies (Jewitt *et al.* 2016), a systemic functional approach to multimodal analysis (SF-MDA) involves developing systemic descriptions of semiotic resources organized according to three main metafunctions – experiential, interpersonal and textual meanings. "Experiential meaning" will provide visual happenings in terms of processes, participants, and circumstances. "Interpersonal

meaning", instead, is more related to gaze, framing, light, and perspective of images. Finally, "textual meaning" involves the concepts of proportion and alignment. This approach allows us to understand "(…) how semiotic choices combine to create meaning" (Jewitt *et al.* 2016: 50). Thus, SF-MDA is mainly based on the metafunctional principle, which plays an important role for understanding the underlying organization of semiotic resources.

In this study, further attention will be devoted to denotation and connotation which characterize images. Denotation characterizes photographs, which represent people or things. This does not mean that they are "neutral" recordings of reality, as subjective perspectives are provided while taking a photo (Machin 2011). According to Barthes (1977), there is no image free of connotation, which represents the ideas and values associated with that image. Connotation is conveyed by connotators, such as poses, objects and settings, as well as photogenia.

In what follows, visual arrangements will be explored also in terms of image act, gaze, size of frame and social distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). As far as the image act and gaze are concerned, it is necessary to point out that they are mainly related to vectors, namely participants' eyelines and gestures, which connect the participants with the viewers. When the participants look directly at the viewers' eyes, contact is established. This visual arrangement has two main functions. On the one hand, it creates a visual form of direct address, in that it acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual "you". On the other hand, it constitutes an "image act", in that the producer uses the image to do something to the viewer (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 117).

Thus, the image can be identified as a sort of "demand", as the participants' gaze and gestures demand something from the viewer. For Instance, gestures, such as pointing at the viewer or inviting the viewer to come closer, convey something the participants want from the viewers, such as staying at distance, or, conversely, creating a kind of bond. Further means, such as facial expressions, may convey different relationships. Participants may smile, so that the viewer is asked to create social affinity with them. Alternatively, they may stare seductively at the viewer, so that the viewer is invited to desire them (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 118).

The way the participants are depicted has been interpreted in terms of "demand" and "offer". For instance, the "demand" picture is preferred in newsreading television and the posed magazine photograph as these contexts require a sense of connection between the viewers and the authority figures, celebrities, and role models they represent. In other contexts, such as television drama or scientific illustration, the "offer" is preferred. In particular, in these contexts, a kind of imaginary barrier is placed between the represented participants and the viewer, where the latter can have the Illusion that the represented figures do not know that they are being looked at, whereas the represented participants can pretend that they are not being watched (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 120).

There is a further dimension to the interactive meanings of images, related to the "size of frame" and "social distance". The former has been explored in terms of parameters such as close-up, medium shot and long shot, and so on. In

particular, the close shot (or "close-up") shows head and shoulders of the subject, and the very close shot ("extreme close-up", "big close-up") shows an even smaller part of the body. The medium close shot cuts off the subject approximately at the waist, the medium shot approximately at the knees. The medium long shot shows the full figure. In the long shot the human figure occupies about half the height of the frame, and the very long shot is anything "wider" than that. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 124)

A further feature to be taken into account is the horizontal angle of an image, which deals with the two main concepts of detachment and involvement. In particular, the horizontal angle provides information about the degree of involvement between the image-producer and the represented participants. The frontal angle says, as it were, "What you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with." The oblique angle says, "What you see here is not part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 136).

Power, rather than involvement, is closely associated with vertical angles. According to Martin (1968: 37–38), "[l]ow angles generally give an impression of superiority, exaltation and triumph […] high angles tend to diminish the individual, to flatten him morally by reducing him to ground level, to render him as caught in an insurmountable determinism". Models and celebrities in magazine articles generally look down on the viewer as they are represented as exercising symbolic power over us. Products in advertisements may be photographed both from a low angle, as having symbolic power over us, and from a high angle, as being within reach and at the viewer's disposal.

Finally, meanings of composition and modality markers related to images will be scrutinized. In particular, three main points can be related to composition – information value, salience and framing. Information values mainly concern the placement of elements (e.g., ideal-real, left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin). Salience, is instead based on elements aimed at attracting the viewer's attention, as placement in the foreground or background, size contrasts in colours, etc. Finally, framing relates to the presence or absence of framing devices, including dividing or frame lines (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 177). In the following sections, the theoretical framework illustrated so far will be investigated in both the American and the British contexts. Specifically, each website section will be explored through a detailed analysis. In short, the following methodological points will be explored:

1) metafunctional principles applied to each image;
2) denotative vs. connotative values;
3) meanings of composition;
4) interactive meanings of the images (when human participants are found in the pictures);
5) visual arrangements and powerful meanings of images (when human participants are found in the pictures).

3. Analysis

In what follows, the counselling services website sections of six universities based in the UK and the USA are investigated. Particularly, a systemic functional approach to multimodal analysis will help to identify the relationship established between the institutions (i.e., the universities) and their clients (i.e., the students) in terms of proximity when counselling services are offered.

3.1. The UK context

In the UK context, the counselling services homepages of three main universities - the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge and the Imperial College of London - are examined. Figure 1 shows the counselling and mental health homepage of the University of Oxford:
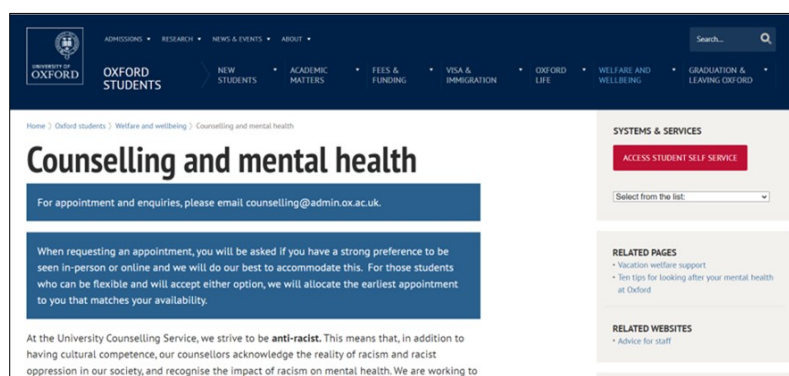

Figure 1. Counselling and Mental health' homepage (University of Oxford)

As can be observed, the first kind of information provided is related to the university addresses to be contacted and possible options offered to the students (e.g. in-person vs online appointment). One of the most relevant points is the focus on racism and its possible relationship with lack of well-being or feeling of oppression. The homepage also includes a video, whose shots (the most relevant ones) are shown in Figure 2:
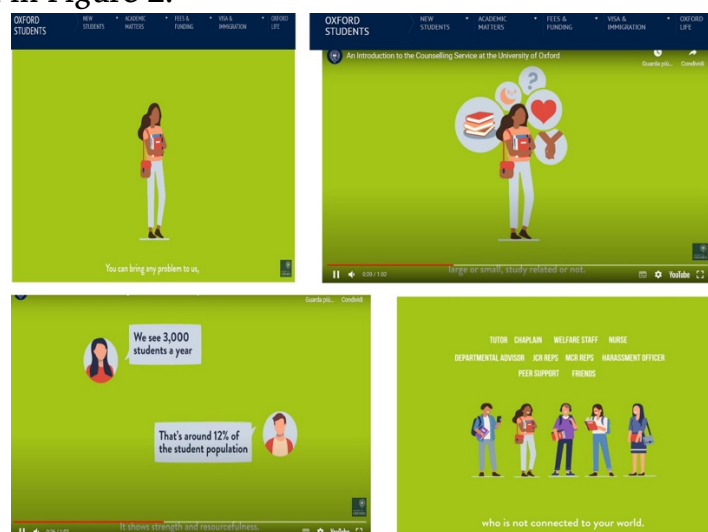

Figure 2. Video shots from the 'Counselling and Mental health' webpage (University of Oxford)

The video shots in Figure 2 offer conceptual representations (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) of the services offered by the university of Oxford along with the people involved in the process. In particular, the second shot iconically represents the different reasons which could cause lack of well-being. For instance, the heart could represent relationship problems, the book may be related to the students' university career. As Dyer (1982: 124) asserted, "The 'icon' is the sign in which "the signifier–signified relationship is one of resemblance, likeness". The various reasons which could encourage disquiet are explicitly conveyed through the description under the images (e.g., "You can bring any problem to us, large or small, study related or not"). Thus, the ideational function is here conveyed through abstract images which iconically represent personal problems or issue. If the compositional features of the pictures are analysed, it is possible to observe some relevant points linked to the informative value of the images themselves. The latter involves the top-bottom position, which is related to real vs. ideal kind of information. Specifically, the upper section usually tends to appeal to the reader to show us "what might be". Conversely, the lower section tends to been more informative and practical showing us "what is" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 186). As regards the salience of the images, this is mainly related to the information concerning the services offered. As illustrated in the methodology section, salience involves elements aimed at drawing the viewers' attention, such as placement in the foreground or background, size contrasts in colours, etc. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 177). In Figure 2, salience is conveyed through the contrasting colours, namely the green background with and the multicoloured fictitious people on the foreground, who represent the different roles acted while delivering the counselling service and the data concerning the number of students catered for by the service. Thus, as far as the contrast between denotative vs. connotative values is concerned, it is possible to assert that connotation is here emphasized by the representation of abstraction of professional roles rather than people. As Machin (2011: 26) states, "[…] The more abstract the image, the more overt and foregrounded its connotative purpose". In Figures 3 and 4, the counselling services homepages of the University of Cambridge and the Imperial College of London are shown:
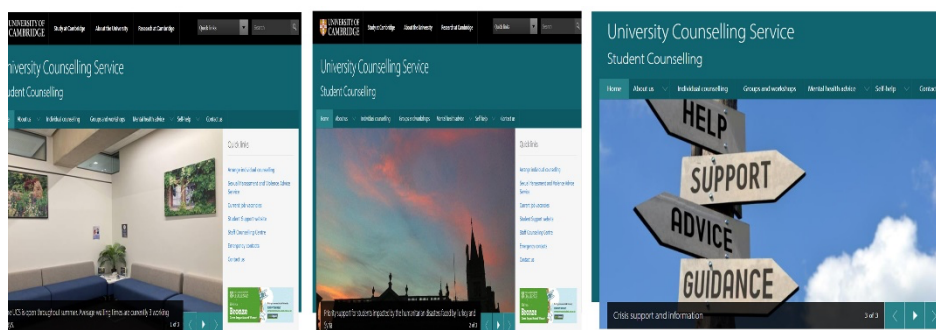

Figure 3. University of Cambridge Counselling Service' homepage.

Figure 4. Student Counselling and Mental Health Advice Service (Imperial College of London)

The three pictures included in Figure 3 are part of a slideshow published on the homepage of the University Counselling service from the University of Cambridge. As far as meanings of composition are concerned, it can be asserted that the pattern "ideal-real" has been followed as in Figure 2, although some differences can be inferred. Specifically, the pictures in Figure 3 look like photos taken from real contexts (e.g., the real room where the Counselling services office is located, a sunset from Turkey or Syria, etc.). The verbal messages below the pictures sound like captions describing the decontextualized images included in the slideshow (e.g., "The UCS is open throughout summer. Average waiting times are currently 3 working days"; "Priority support for students impacted by the humanitarian disasters faced by Turkey and Syria"). A huge amount of information is given through each section shown on the homepage and including individual or group counselling, mental health issues, self-help services along with a range of diseases related to well-being. Informative values are reinforced by clear-cut framing devices, which divide the images from the verbal messages. Although the informative values of the pictures of both universities seem to be relevant, more realism is found in the pictures included in Figure 3.

Specifically, denotative features are found here. In particular, a representation of the room is observed. Realism is found when "[...] Pictures which have the perspective, the degree of detail, the kind of colour rendition, etc. of the standard technology of colour photography have the highest modality" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 159). Each realism has its naturalism, which is intended as the most natural form of representing reality. In our society the main standard by which we judge visual realism remains naturalism as "photorealism". More specifically, the main criteria to distinguish between what we can "normally" see as an object and what we can see of this object in a visual representation is based on currently dominant conventions included in photographic technology. For instance, when colour becomes more saturated, "more than real", it is perceived as excessive. When it is less saturated we judge it "less than real", or "ghostly". In short, pictures that have the features of photography have the highest modality, and are seen as "naturalistic"(Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 158-159).

In addition to naturalism which contributes to the denotative feature of the picture, a textual metafunction seems to be relevant in Figures 3 and 4 as the use of the same colours (i.e. green and blue) in both the verbal messages and the pictures creates a cohesive whole.

In Figure 4 from the "Student Counselling and Mental Health Advice Service' homepage of the Imperial College of London, it is possible to observe only one picture representing hands of different colours depicted one next to the other. In contrast with the pictures examined so far, this image seems to evoke some metaphorical meanings concerning friendship and closeness. According to the Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff 1993), a metaphor "[…] is not a figure of speech but a mode of thought" (Lakoff 1993: 210). In particular, cognitive linguists assert that metaphors mainly concern the relationship between what is represented visually and not verbally. Thus, they mainly focus on non-verbal manifestations, such as gestures and pictures. Multimodal metaphors, instead, are defined as "[…] metaphors whose targets and source are rendered exclusively or predominantly in two different modes / modalities and, in many cases, the verbal is one of these" (Forceville and Aparisi 2009: 4). Multimodal metaphors are usually found in corporate discourse as they are often aimed at promoting corporate identity or products (Csaba and Bengtsson 2006). In Figure 4, overlapping hands of different colours convey association with positive values including closeness to the students who are welcomed by the people working for the counselling service. The verbal message under the picture seems to reinforce corporate values by directly addressing the viewer (i.e.,"Welcome to the student and Mental Health Advice Service"). In Figures 3 and 4, neither interactive meanings of images nor visual arrangements can be explored as these are usually found when human participants are involved in an ideal interaction with the viewer. In these figures, no direct interaction between participants and the viewers is observed.

3.2. The USA context

This section includes the investigation of the counselling services offered by the three US universities under scrutiny from a multimodal perspective.

Figure 5 presents the "Counseling and Mental Health Service" section of the website of the University of Harvard:
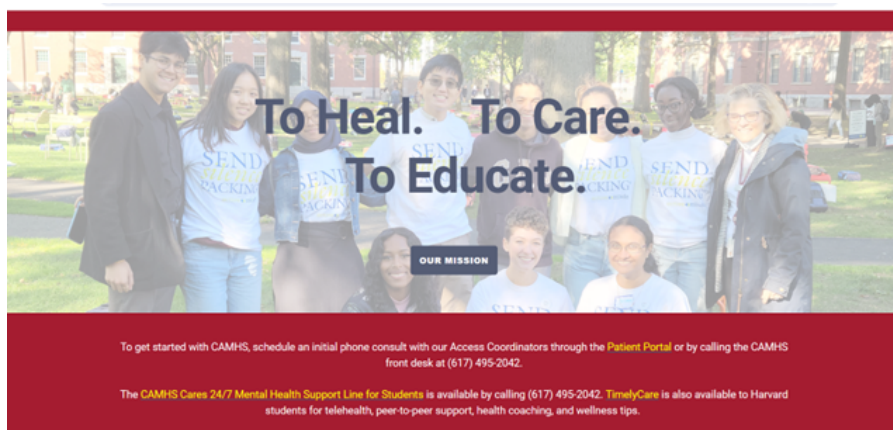

Figure 5. Counseling and Mental Health Service (Harvard University)

The people involved in the Counselling service seem to be represented, as can be inferred from the name of the Association written on their t-shirts. Specifically, "Send Silence Packing" is a programme promoted by Active Minds, which is "[...] the nation's premier nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults encouraging suicide prevention and national mental health"[3]. As can be read on the Active Minds website, the programme inspires action for suicide prevention while connecting participants with local and national mental health resources. The people represented in the picture are looking at the camera and smiling. If the semiotic contrast between "demand" and "offer" is investigated, it can be asserted that the "demand" value is the most relevant one, as the represented people are addressing the viewers directly while encouraging them to join the programme. The frontal angle reinforces this concept.

As explained in section 2 above, if something is represented from a frontal angle, involvement rather than power is suggested. Involvement is also explicitly conveyed by the verbal message where the students are invited to fix an appointment (i.e., "[...] schedule an initial phone consult with our access coordinators"). Furthermore, the people are looking at the viewers in the eye, thus a contact is established. This visual arrangement involves the main function to create a visual form of direct address while acknowledging the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual "you" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 117).

Thus, the interpersonal function is the most relevant metafunctional principle where *interactive participants* rather than *represented participants* are found. The former are

> the participants who speak and listen or write and read, make images or view them, whereas the latter are the participants who constitute the subject matter of the communication; that is, the people, places and things (including abstract 'things') represented in and by the speech or writing or image, the participants about whom or which we are speaking or writing or producing images (ibid.)

Furthermore, denotative features rather than some connotative ones are observed. As Machin (2011) asserts, denotation is mainly related to photographs. The picture included in Figure 5 seems to be a photograph representing the actual testimonials of the programme they are part of. Finally, as far as meanings of composition are concerned, it is possible to assert that salience is the most relevant feature as the three main words (i.e. to "heal", "to care", "to educate") aimed at catching the viewer's attention are placed in the foreground, whereas, no framing dividing lines are observed between the message and the people represented in the background. This seems to reinforce the commitment by the professionals working for the counselling service, who are involved in the promotion of students' well-being.

Greater abstraction is found in Figure 6, which is taken from the homepage of the "Counseling and Psychological Services" of Stanford University:

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[3] https://www.activeminds.org/about-us/mission-and-impact/ (visited 10/02/2024).
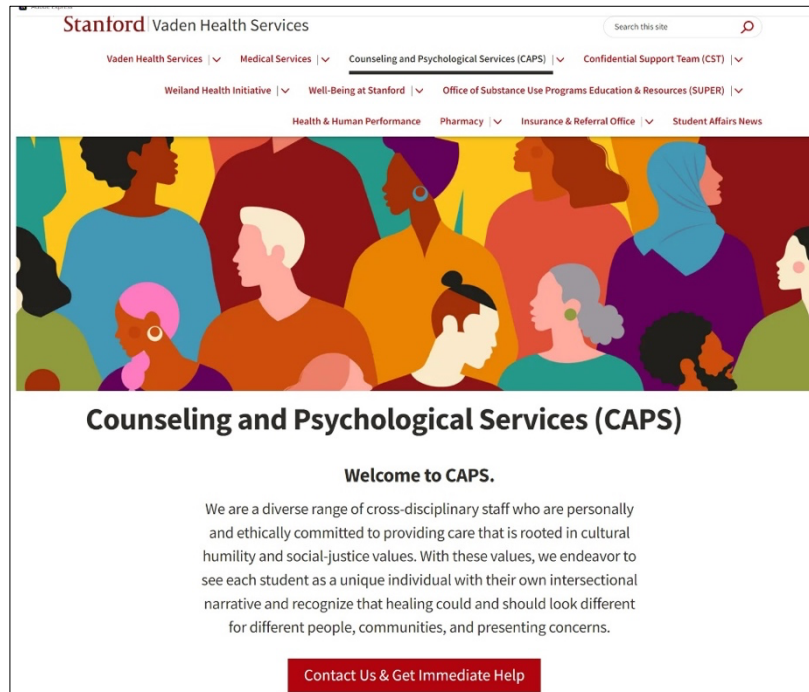
Figure 6. Counseling and Psychological Services (Stanford University)

The figure seems to convey a metaphorical diversity due to the different features characterizing the people represented. Specifically, different skin colours along with different clothing items (i.e., a veil) are the most relevant elements. In the verbal message below the figure, diversity is indeed emphasized as related to both the "diverse range" of the staff working for the services and the different actions introduced ("[…] they see each student as a unique individual with their own intersectional narrative and recognize that healing could and should look different for different people, communities, and presenting concerns")[4]. Thus, connotation rather than denotation is observed in the picture as abstract values including diversity and and a personalized educational action rather than real people are represented. According to the "top-bottom" informative value, which can be conveyed through the ideal-real contrast, the "real" information is here found at the bottom in terms of facts concerning the counselling service, whereas abstraction is observed in the picture. Further observations include the kind of narrative chosen by this university to focus on the service provided. In particular, the institution introduces itself as an association of people ethically committed to provide help to students through some different types of actions (i.e., "We are a diverse range of cross-disciplinary staff who are personally and ethically committed to providing care that is rooted in cultural humility and social-justice values"). Commitment is emphasized by the use of the personal pronoun "we". The short introduction is immediately followed by a direct invitation addressed to the reader to contact the service (e.g. "Contact us and Get Immediate help"). Thus, proximity with the students is built up through communication of ethical values and personal commitment by the institution to offer care and attention to the

[4] https://vaden.stanford.edu/caps (visited 10/02/2024).

students. The interpersonal function is mainly found here, where students are directly invited to contact the service in order to get immediate help. Notwithstanding, no direct contact is conveyed through the image where the fictitious people represented are in the "offer" position rather than the "demand" one. Particularly, they seem to talk to each other, thus simulating possible interactions. In short, although the figure is characterized by abstraction, the people represented could be described as "interactive participants" as they look like interacting among each other rather than posing.

Figure 7 shows the homepage of "Student Mental Health & Counseling Services" from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

Figure 7. Student Mental Health & Counseling Services (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

A naturalistic representation is found, as the photo may be the actual building where the Service is located. Thus, a denotative function rather than a connotative one seems to be conveyed. If the verbal message is analysed, it is possible to assert that a high degree of confidentiality is found along with informality through the use of the imperative and informal utterances, which are usually employed in conversation (i.e., "Give us a call"). Furthermore, no dividing line is found between the text and the image, thus reinforcing the lack of emphasis on the institution, which is physically represented in the photo. Similarly to what observed in Figure 6, in Figure 7 the interpersonal metafunction is mainly established by the verbal message as the reader is directly and explicitly addressed.

4. Concluding remarks

Through the lens of a multimodal perspective, this preliminary study mainly focused on the homepages of the counselling services found on six websites of UK and USA universities listed among the best ones by the World University Rankings. Specifically, as asserted in the research questions, the investigation of the main multimodal tools found on the universities websites to promote their Counselling services was carried out. Furthermore, some preliminary

considerations concerning cross-cultural differences related to the promotion of well-being by universities from the UK and USA contexts were provided. In the following table, a summary of the main outcomes is provided:

Table 2. Summary of the main findings.

	UK Context	USA context
Metafunctional principle	Ideational / textual / interpersonal (the latter only through informative verbal messages)	Textual, ideational, interpersonal (the latter mainly through pictures and direct address to the reader)
Denotative vs. Connotative features	Connotative features (abstraction) except for denotative features in Figure 3	Denotative features characterizing both the people and the places represented except for abstraction found in Figure 6
Interactive meanings of images / visual arrangements	No actual example found except for abstract represented participants in Figure 2	Interactive participants
Meanings of composition	Top-bottom position as the main value / clear framing devices in all the pictures	Top-bottom position in one picture (Figure 6); no framing devices between images and verbal messages

A more prominent "offer" position was observed in British counselling services websites compared to the ones in the USA context. "When images 'offer', they primarily offer information […] When images 'demand', they demand, one could say, the 'goods-and-services' that realize a particular social relation" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 118). The "offer" position is particularly conveyed through the focus on the institution and the services offered. Thus, a representational metafunction related to the professional roles belonging to the people working for the UK universities is mainly found. In contrast, a more interactive metafunction is found in the USA context, which is particularly conveyed through a more direct address to the viewer according to a certain degree of informality along with more emphasis on the commitment by the institution itself. These outcomes will have to be confirmed in the future through the investigation of a higher number of university websites.

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