

ARTICLE

English, Identity, and the Digital Face of Higher Education: A Case Study of Saudi University Websites in Global Context

Mona Sabir 

English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah 21589, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

In increasingly globalized academic contexts, English plays a central role in how non-Anglophone universities project their institutional identity. This study investigates how six Saudi universities use English on their official websites to construct institutional identity in a global context. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, linguistic landscape theory, and multimodal semiotics, the research analyzes bilingual digital content (such as mission statements, internationalization narratives, homepage structures, and visual layout) to explore the semiotic hierarchies shaping identity construction. The findings reveal a discursive bifurcation: English predominates in internationally oriented content, including research, partnerships, and rankings, while Arabic asserts national culture, religious values, and civic responsibility. Institutions with STEM specializations or private governance structures tend to foreground English more prominently, whereas religiously affiliated or regionally grounded universities maintain Arabic dominance. Across the sample, visual and structural cues reinforce English as a marker of academic modernity and global aspiration, often shaping the user's first impression of institutional identity. Rather than articulating a balanced bilingual identity, these websites reflect a strategic linguistic negotiation shaped by ideology, audience, and institutional ambition. The study contributes to debates on Englishization, institutional branding, and the politics of language in digital higher education, with particular relevance to contexts across the Global South where institutions seek to balance global competitiveness with cultural and linguistic rootedness.

Keywords: Language and Identity; Digital Linguistic Landscape; Englishization; Higher Education Internationalization; Critical Discourse Analysis

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Mona Sabir, English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah 21589, Saudi Arabia; Email: msabir@kau.edu.sa

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 29 August 2025 | Revised: 25 September 2025 | Accepted: 29 September 2025 | Published Online: 24 October 2025
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i11.11869>

CITATION

Sabir, M., 2025. English, Identity, and the Digital Face of Higher Education: A Case Study of Saudi University Websites in Global Context. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(11): 1157–1167. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i11.11869>

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2025 by the author(s). Published by Bilingual Publishing Group. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

As higher education systems around the world continue to globalize, English has assumed a pivotal role not only as the dominant language of science and academic publication but also as a powerful symbolic resource for institutional identity construction. In this context, university websites have emerged as strategic instruments through which institutions narrate their values, project legitimacy, and align themselves with global academic hierarchies. These websites do not merely disseminate information; they function as multimodal texts embedded with ideological choices—choices that index institutional priorities, imagined audiences, and discursive alignments with both national traditions and international aspirations^[1].

Existing research has shown that English in non-Anglophone higher education is often used to signal modernity, competitiveness, and international prestige^[2,3]. This process of “Englishization” is more than a linguistic shift—it is a reconfiguration of institutional identity in ways that could marginalize local languages, knowledge systems, and cultural narratives^[4,5]. Scholars such as Pennycook^[6] and Kumaravadivelu^[7] have critically examined the ideological underpinnings of English use, cautioning against viewing it as a neutral medium. Instead, they argue, English operates as a site of power, shaping epistemological hierarchies and reconfiguring notions of belonging and legitimacy in academic spaces.

While significant attention has been paid to English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and its classroom-level implications, less research has explored how English is used in the digital domain to construct institutional identities, especially in the context of university websites, which serve as curated representations of institutional ethos for both domestic and international audiences. As Motschenbacher^[8] emphasizes, analyzing the linguistic landscape of university websites reveals how digital semiotic choices not only reflect but also reshape institutional ideologies and language policy practices. This is particularly salient in the Global South (a term commonly used to refer to economically developing regions in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East), where universities work to balance the adoption of global academic standards with the preservation of their cultural, linguistic, and religious integrity in their local contexts^[9,10].

Saudi Arabia presents a particularly rich site for investigating these dynamics. Aligned with the transformative goals of Vision 2030, Saudi universities are actively enhancing their international visibility, expanding research capacity, and pursuing higher positions in global rankings. At the same time, they are embedded within a sociocultural framework that foregrounds Arabic linguistic identity, Islamic values, and national sovereignty. This dual imperative (to be both globally competitive and culturally authentic) renders Saudi university websites a unique and underexplored arena for examining how digital identity construction reflects broader ideological considerations and strategic positioning.

This study critically investigates how English is used on the websites of six Saudi universities—King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Prince Sultan University, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, and Umm Al-Qura University—to construct and communicate institutional identity in the context of global higher education. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, linguistic landscape theory^[11] and theories of identity and globalization in applied linguistics^[12,13], explores how language choices reflect institutional aspirations, target audience segmentation, and ideological positioning.

By analyzing mission statements, internationalization pages, interface language design, and visual hierarchies, this study reveals how Saudi universities strategically deploy English to perform academic modernity while relying on Arabic to anchor cultural legitimacy. It further examines how different types of institutions (public, private, STEM-focused, and religious) navigate this negotiation in distinct ways. Ultimately, the study contributes to wider conversations on Englishization, digital multilingualism, and the politics of representation in non-Western academic contexts, offering insight into how universities in the Global South mediate the relationship between global visibility and national belonging in the semiotic affordances of the web.

2. Previous Research

The interplay between language and institutional identity in higher education has attracted growing scholarly attention across fields such as applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and international education. In the context of globalization,

English has emerged as both a symbolic and practical instrument, shaping how universities communicate, position themselves, and negotiate their identity in an increasingly competitive international arena. This literature has moved beyond viewing language as a mere medium of instruction to recognizing it as an ideological tool—one that reflects, reproduces, and occasionally resists dominant power structures.

A foundational body of work critiques the ideological underpinnings of English dominance, particularly in non-Anglophone settings. The theory of linguistic imperialism suggests that English is deployed as a mechanism of Western epistemological dominance, reproducing Anglophone norms at the expense of local linguistic and cultural resources^[5]. This critique finds echoes in Piller and Cho's^[4] conceptualization of neoliberal language policy, which positions English as a market-driven asset—valued not only for communicative utility but also as a symbol of prestige, modernity, and employability. Institutions adopting English Medium Instruction (EMI) and English branding thus engage in a form of symbolic capital accumulation, aligning themselves with global academic hierarchies while potentially overlooking or sidelining local knowledge systems^[3].

Canagarajah's^[14] theory of translingual practice offers valuable insight into these dynamics by challenging monolithic views of language and emphasizing the fluid, hybrid, and performative nature of multilingual communication. Canagarajah^[14] argues that institutions and individuals do not simply adopt English but adapt and negotiate its use in contextually meaningful ways. This view encourages a shift from deficit-oriented models of language use toward more dynamic understandings of linguistic identity formation. Pennycook^[6], similarly, introduces the idea of language as local practice, emphasizing the role of context, power, and ideology in shaping how English is taken up in specific sociocultural environments.

The digital turn in sociolinguistic research has shifted focus to online spaces as key sites of linguistic performance. University websites, in particular, have been examined as curated platforms where institutional identity is strategically constructed through language choice, design, and semiotics. The corpus-based discourse analysis of Chinese university websites reveals how English and Chinese are differentially deployed to construct dual narratives: one appealing to global

audiences, the other grounded in national identity^[15]. Yeung and Ku^[16] further argue that EMI universities in Hong Kong use English not just to inform, but to project an aspirational identity, often downplaying the local in favor of the global. Their study aligns with Motschenbacher^[8], who conceptualize university websites as digital linguistic landscapes—multimodal texts where power, ideology, and institutional ethos are encoded through visual and linguistic choices.

In European higher education, similar dynamics are at play. A comparative study across EU institutions documents the rise of English-taught programs as both a branding strategy and a policy tool for internationalization^[2]. Smit and Dafouz^[17] extend this analysis by exploring how EMI policies shape institutional dynamics, including the balance between international ambitions and national language mandates, as well as the negotiation between market imperatives and academic inclusivity. Their work emphasizes that the spread of English is not simply a pedagogical shift, but part of a broader transformation in how universities conceptualize their missions and constituencies.

In the context of the Arab Gulf, and Saudi Arabia in particular, scholarship remains emergent but is beginning to offer critical insights. Drawing on the work of Hopkyns and Zoghbor's^[10], Gulf universities appear to manage a complex positioning as they seek to demonstrate global fluency through English while simultaneously affirming national, religious, and cultural values through Arabic. The volume illustrates that bilingualism in these contexts is rarely symmetrical or ideologically neutral, as it is shaped by institutional priorities and the orientation toward target audiences.

Barnawi and Alhawsawi^[18], in addition, highlight the ambivalence of EMI in Saudi higher education. On one hand, English is often promoted as a means of achieving academic excellence and global engagement, while simultaneously raising concerns about its impact on cultural identity and student belonging. Mahboob and Elyas^[19] frame this dynamic within the broader ideological contestations between tradition and modernity in Saudi educational discourse. Their work calls attention to the cultural politics of English, arguing that language policy must be understood in light of historical, religious, and geopolitical forces.

Notably absent in much of this literature, however, is a systematic analysis of how Saudi universities use digital platforms, particularly their official websites, to navigate

and communicate this complex positioning. While earlier studies have investigated curriculum, classroom discourse, or national policy documents, the digital self-representation of universities remains underexplored. Yet, as Motschenbacher^[8] argues, websites function as semiotic interfaces where institutions “perform” their identity through strategic bilingualism, visual design, and ideological signaling. In the context of the Global South, where institutions aim to enhance international visibility while preserving cultural authenticity, such platforms serve as especially potent tools for articulating institutional positioning.

This study builds on and contributes to a growing body of research examining the intersection of language, identity, and institutional representation in higher education. It offers a comparative analysis of six Saudi university websites that were purposefully selected to reflect diversity in institutional type (public, private, religious, and STEM-focused) as well as variation in size, institutional profile, and linguistic presentation. This sampling strategy was intended to capture a broad spectrum of how universities with different missions and profiles navigate the interplay between global visibility and local identity. The analysis is situated within broader theoretical frameworks, including linguistic landscape theory, language policy in globalized contexts, and translingual practice, and is informed by multimodal discourse analysis to explore how linguistic and visual elements collectively encode institutional values.

Responding to calls by scholars such as Kumaravadevelu^[7] and Norton^[13] for more context-sensitive approaches to language policy analysis, this study acknowledges the varied histories, priorities, and communicative strategies of institutions situated beyond dominant English-speaking academic contexts. It seeks to examine how these institutions navigate the evolving demands of visibility and authenticity in the digital sphere.

Building on previous scholarship, this study explores two central questions: how universities draw on English to articulate a global academic identity, and how Arabic is mobilized to affirm cultural and national rootedness. These questions are especially salient for institutions situated beyond dominant English-speaking contexts, where navigating the dual demands of global engagement and local alignment has become a defining institutional concern. The literature reviewed offers a conceptual foundation for examining how

Saudi universities approach this linguistic negotiation in the digital sphere. Through a multimodal analysis of university websites, the study highlights how language and visual design work in tandem to construct institutional identity at the crossroads of international aspiration and cultural continuity, a dynamic that resonates across higher education systems in comparable global contexts.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to examine how Saudi universities use English on their institutional websites to perform identity work in a globalized higher education landscape. The methodology is grounded in the premise that language on university websites is not merely a neutral conduit for information transmission, but a socially situated practice embedded with ideological choices, institutional values, and strategic representations. Following Fairclough’s^[20] conceptualization of discourse as both language-in-use and a mode of social action, this approach enables a critical reading of how linguistic and semiotic elements contribute to shaping the public-facing identities of universities operating within both internationally driven objectives and culturally rooted values.

Methodologically, the study is situated within an exploratory qualitative case study design. Saudi Arabia was selected as a theoretically significant case, representing a non-Anglophone, post-monolingual society undergoing rapid educational transformation under the auspices of Vision 2030. The case study approach allows for rich contextualization and cross-institutional comparison, yielding insights that may be applicable to similarly positioned institutions in the Global South. The research sample consists of six universities purposively selected to reflect institutional diversity along several axes: public vs. private, religious vs. secular, STEM-oriented vs. comprehensive, and globally ranked vs. nationally focused. The universities analyzed include King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Prince Sultan University, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, and Umm Al-Qura University.

Data were collected from the English and bilingual sections of each university’s official website, which represent

their most accessible and internationally visible textual artifacts. A range of webpages was analyzed, including the homepage, “About Us” and leadership statements, mission and vision pages, international affairs sections, admissions portals, and areas highlighting global partnerships, rankings, and academic excellence. Where available, interface language options, navigation design, and visual aesthetics were also reviewed to assess how multimodal features support or contest the linguistic narratives. Archived versions of these websites were consulted through the Internet Archive (Wayback Machine) to track diachronic shifts in language strategy and branding orientation, especially for older institutions that have recently revised their international identity.

The analytical process was multi-layered and theoretically informed. Critical discourse analysis^[21] served as the primary tool for interpreting linguistic patterns, lexical choices, and intertextual alignments with global academic discourse. CDA enabled examination of how universities construct institutional ethos through discourses of modernity, excellence, innovation, and cultural pride. To complement this, multimodal discourse analysis (drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen’s^[22] grammar of visual design) was employed to interpret how visual and spatial elements—such as font size, color, layout, and imagery—function as semiotic resources in institutional identity construction. Particular attention was paid to how English and the country’s native language (e.g., Arabic) are ordered, juxtaposed, or compartmentalized in digital space.

In addition, sociolinguistic approaches to institutional identity informed the interpretation of identity as a situated practice, where discourses and semiotic choices index institutional positioning within global and local hierarchies^[23,24]. Linguistic landscape theory^[11] provided further conceptual scaffolding by treating university websites as digital landscapes in which language visibility indexes ideological orientations and target audiences. This integration allowed for a more grounded analysis of how language presence, absence, and spatial arrangement signal institutional alignment with both global imaginaries and national-cultural commitments.

Data analysis followed four iterative stages. First, each university’s website was systematically reviewed, and relevant content was saved, annotated, and organized into a

structured database capturing linguistic, visual, and structural features. Second, an open coding process was conducted using a hybrid approach that combined deductive codes derived from existing scholarship (e.g., internationalization discourse, bilingual branding, religious legitimacy) with inductive themes that emerged from repeated readings of the data. Third, thematic clustering was carried out to identify key discursive patterns, particularly in relation to how English was used to foreground global identity markers, while Arabic was invoked to sustain cultural grounding. Finally, cross-institutional comparisons were conducted to analyze variations in English prominence, branding strategies, and digital positioning, with sensitivity to the institutional mission, historical development, and audience scope.

To enhance the credibility and reflexivity of the analysis, an interpretive journal was maintained throughout the research process. This journal served as a space for documenting emerging insights, noting analytical complexities, and reflecting on the researcher’s positionality within the national educational context under study. Peer debriefing was conducted with three academic colleagues specializing in language policy and digital education, who reviewed portions of the coded data and provided feedback on theme development and theoretical framing. This iterative dialogue helped refine the analysis and minimize interpretive bias.

Ethically, the study did not involve human participants and thus did not require formal ethical approval. However, all data were treated with academic integrity, and institutional representations were analyzed with respect, cultural awareness, and critical neutrality. The goal was not to evaluate or critique institutional quality but to understand how digital language practices perform ideological functions in the construction of institutional identity.

In sum, the methodological framework integrates discourse-based, multimodal, and spatial-semiotic approaches to offer a comprehensive account of how English is deployed on Saudi university websites as both a symbolic and strategic resource. By foregrounding the intersection of language, identity, and digital representation, the study contributes methodologically and conceptually to the growing literature on globalized higher education, linguistic landscapes, and institutional discourse in the Global South.

4. Results

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of how English and Arabic are used across six prominent Saudi university websites to construct institutional identity within a globalized higher education context. The findings are organized in response to the two research questions: how Saudi universities utilize English to project a global identity, and how Arabic is employed to maintain cultural and national authenticity. Through critical discourse and multimodal analysis, distinct linguistic patterns and visual hierarchies emerge across the selected digital platforms, revealing complex negotiations of identity, audience, and ideology.

The websites examined include those of King Saud University (KSU), Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Prince Sultan University (PSU), King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), and Umm Al-Qura University (UQU).

These institutions were selected to represent a diversity of institutional types (ranging from globally ranked research-intensive universities to culturally grounded religious institutions) and offer a nuanced view of the Saudi digital linguistic landscape.

Across the six universities, three main interface strategies were identified: English-dominant, Arabic-dominant, and balanced bilingual presentation. **Figure 1** illustrates this distribution, revealing that half of the universities (KAU, KSU, IMSIU) employ a balanced bilingual model in which English and Arabic are nearly equally visible and navigable. In contrast, two universities (PSU and KFUPM) prioritize English, often defaulting to English homepages and limiting Arabic to optional or secondary access points. Only one institution, Umm Al-Qura University, privileges Arabic, aligning with its deeply religious and culturally embedded identity. This distribution reflects not only institutional orientation but also ideological positioning regarding global versus local identity markers.

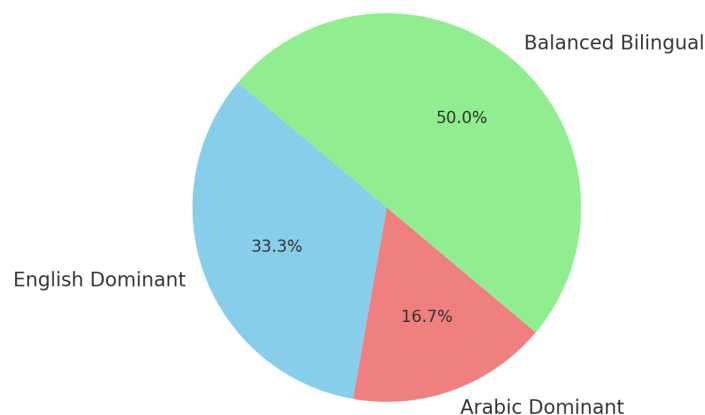


Figure 1. Homepage language interface across selected Saudi universities.

Note: This pie chart shows the distribution of homepage language strategies (English-dominant, Arabic-dominant, or balanced bilingual) used by six Saudi universities. Data were collected from their official websites as of July 2025.

An in-depth comparative analysis of these websites further clarifies how English and Arabic are semiotically and discursively deployed. As shown in **Table 1**, English is consistently used to convey themes related to global identity, including international rankings, research visibility, strategic partnerships, and academic excellence. Arabic, on the other hand, is more prominently associated with cultural continuity, Islamic values, national heritage, and community engagement. The table synthesizes the thematic patterns, visual design strategies, and linguistic hierarchies observed on each university's homepage and strategic content sections.

The use of English as a tool for global visibility is particularly evident in the strategic sections of university websites. KAU's English portal, for instance, prominently features links to international partnerships, rankings, and graduate programs. It also includes pages devoted to IELTS, accreditation, MA TESOL offerings, and Vision 2030 contributions, each of which is presented with professional English phrasing and global branding aesthetics. Similarly, PSU and KFUPM project a fully Anglicized institutional identity, highlighting foreign affiliations, dual degrees, and science-based research collaborations, while presenting Arabic content only sparingly.

Table 1. Linguistic and visual representations of institutional identity on Saudi universities' homepages.

University	Homepage Language Interface	English: Global Identity Themes	Arabic: Cultural Identity Themes	Visual Language Hierarchy
King Saud University (KSU)	Bilingual, English prominent	Innovation, international collaborations, research visibility	National service, Islamic values	English menus and banners emphasized
King Abdulaziz University (KAU)	Bilingual, visual balance	Rankings, international partnerships, graduate programs	Heritage, ethics, community outreach	Equal visual prominence of both languages
Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU)	Bilingual, Arabic default	Vision 2030, global initiatives, academic excellence	Religious events, cultural traditions	Arabic interface dominant with selective English
Prince Sultan University (PSU)	English default, Arabic secondary	Dual degrees, partnerships with foreign institutions	Minimal; institutional history	English fully prioritized in layout
King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM)	English dominant, minimal Arabic	STEM research, industry links, global competitiveness	Minimal cultural anchoring	English dominant; Arabic optional
Umm Al-Qura University (UQU)	Arabic dominant, English limited	Graduate studies, international recognition	Religious heritage, community focus	Arabic visually central, English peripheral

In contrast, Arabic assumes a symbolic and culturally grounded role across all six universities. At IMSIU, for example, Arabic pages give considerable attention to Ramadan campaigns, religious outreach, and Qur'anic education. UQU's Arabic interface foregrounds Meccan heritage, community service, and Islamic scholarship, positioning the university as an intellectual and spiritual centre. Even at institutions that favour a balanced model, such as KAU and KSU, Arabic is consistently employed in sections dealing with ethical values, community involvement, and the institutional legacy associated with national identity.

The visual hierarchy of each website reinforces this division of communicative labour. English typically appears in more strategic or visually prominent positions, such as navigation bars, top-level menus, and homepage banners, especially in content targeting international audiences. Arabic, while not entirely absent from these positions, is often used in sections that emphasize local engagement, moral messaging, or religious values. KAU emerges as an exception in this regard, with nearly symmetrical visual weight given to both languages, reflecting an integrated model of digital bilingualism.

The findings reveal a clear pattern of dual discursive regimes. English is mobilized as a strategic resource aligned with global academic legitimacy, while Arabic functions as a symbolic anchor tied to national and cultural authenticity. This is consistent with the notion of the digital linguistic landscape as a site of ideological negotiation, as well as with Hopkyns and Zoghbor's^[10] work on Gulf university identity construction. The semiotic division of labour

between English and Arabic supports Pennycook's^[6] argument that English functions not as a neutral medium but as a powerful ideological instrument that shapes institutional self-representation.

In sum, Saudi universities are not merely translating content between Arabic and English. Instead, they are actively shaping multilingual digital identities in which each language performs a distinct communicative role. English is often associated with themes such as modernity, academic excellence, and international engagement, while Arabic conveys continuity with cultural traditions and institutional values. This dual-language strategy reflects a broader approach to language use in higher education, where universities seek to balance global presence with local relevance.

5. Discussion

This study examined how universities strategically use English on their official websites to shape institutional identity within the landscape of globalized higher education. By focusing on Saudi universities as a case study, the analysis offers insights that are applicable to a wider range of non-Anglophone institutions navigating similar dynamics of international visibility and cultural positioning. Drawing on a comparative analysis of six universities: King Saud University (KSU), Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Prince Sultan University (PSU), King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), and Umm Al-Qura University (UQU), the findings reveal a set of complex and ideologically loaded

language strategies. English is consistently employed as a semiotic resource to signify global legitimacy, academic excellence, and international reach, while Arabic operates as an anchor for cultural continuity, national alignment, and religious values.

As shown in **Figure 1**, three distinct interface strategies were evident across the sample: English-dominant (e.g., KFUPM and PSU), Arabic-dominant (e.g., IMSIU and UQU), and balanced bilingualism (e.g., KSU and KAU). The figure illustrates this distribution, with half of the sampled institutions adopting an ostensibly bilingual model. However, closer inspection reveals that even within “bilingual” interfaces, English frequently commands greater visual prominence in key semiotic elements, such as navigation menus, homepage banners, and strategic headings. These design choices echo Kress and van Leeuwen’s^[22] theory of multimodality, which emphasizes that visual layout and spatial organization are ideologically meaningful and work in tandem with textual content to construct institutional narratives.

Across institutions, English appears in sections aligned with global identity themes: Vision 2030 initiatives, international rankings, research collaborations, dual-degree programs, and graduate studies. Arabic, in contrast, retains salience in domains tied to national heritage, Islamic values, community engagement, and institutional history. This symbolic bifurcation of linguistic functions supports Motschenbacher’s^[8] argument that multilingualism in institutional contexts often reflects “dual discursive regimes,” where different languages serve different audiences and ideological purposes.

The distinction is especially pronounced in PSU and KFUPM, both of which present English as the default or dominant language throughout their websites. These institutions, aligned with industry, science, and internationalization agendas, offer minimal Arabic content and rarely foreground national or religious identity in their English sections. Here, English is not just a medium of communication, but a branding tool, projecting market-readiness and global competitiveness. This reflects Jenkins’s^[3] critique of neoliberal language policy in higher education, where English is instrumentalized for visibility in international rankings and strategic partnerships.

Conversely, IMSIU and UQU provide Arabic as the default interface, with English content available but secondary. These institutions are more culturally embedded, positioning

themselves as custodians of religious heritage and national identity. English is selectively used in international-facing subpages but does not shape the website’s core visual or discursive structure. This approach reflects Canagarajah’s^[14] model of strategic negotiation, where multilingualism is adapted to preserve ideological alignment while cautiously engaging global trends.

KSU and KAU, by contrast, present more integrated bilingualism. Both institutions show near parity in English and Arabic visibility, though the division of content remains functionally differentiated. English typically dominates sections related to international cooperation, postgraduate programs, and research excellence, while Arabic is used for public service messaging and cultural themes. Despite visual balance, the semiotic weight of English remains high, particularly in top-level menus and banners that interface with global audiences.

National policy, particularly Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, plays a noticeable role across all cases. The initiative emphasizes educational development, international engagement, and a shift toward a knowledge-based economy, encouraging universities to enhance their global presence. English becomes the natural vehicle for signaling alignment with these ambitions. However, the extent of institutional uptake varies. KSU and KAU attempt a measured response, maintaining a cultural-linguistic equilibrium, while PSU and KFUPM place greater emphasis on projecting a global identity, which occasionally appears to receive more focus than local representation.

These findings highlight ongoing considerations around linguistic representation and digital identity in multilingual academic contexts. While English can enhance international accessibility and engagement, its dominant presence may inadvertently limit the visibility of Arabic as a medium of academic and cultural expression. As Mahboob and Elyas^[19] note, maintaining a meaningful role for Arabic within educational discourse is important for supporting local academic ecosystems and cultural continuity. The key challenge lies in finding a sustainable balance that affirms both global engagement and institutional identity.

In comparing these findings with patterns reported in other non-Anglophone higher education contexts, Saudi universities’ digital “Englishization” strategies appear both aligned with and distinct from broader global trends. For

instance, research on European, East Asian, and Middle Eastern universities has shown that English frequently dominates international-facing web content, signaling legitimacy and competitiveness^[25,26]. However, unlike some European cases where local languages risk near-erasure in digital spaces, Saudi universities retain Arabic as a visible marker of cultural and religious continuity. This dual orientation highlights a form of “strategic bilingualism” that seeks to reconcile global market imperatives with national identity commitments. In this sense, Saudi institutions exemplify a hybrid approach: more assertive in their use of English than many Asian or Latin American counterparts, yet more protective of their native language than some European universities undergoing advanced Englishization. Such comparisons underscore that the Saudi case is not an outlier, but part of a wider negotiation faced by non-Anglophone universities, though shaped by distinctive ideological, cultural, and policy frameworks.

By treating university websites as dynamic semiotic spaces, this study extends the scope of language policy analysis beyond policy documents and classroom practices into the digital domain. Websites are curated performances of identity, shaped by institutional visions, audience expectations, and sociopolitical contexts. They offer a uniquely revealing window into how universities in the Global South (particularly in Saudi Arabia) navigate the double imperative of global relevance and local authenticity. In conclusion, the use of English on Saudi university websites reflects a discursively negotiated identity, balancing the demands of international academic legitimacy with those of cultural rootedness. While institutional approaches differ in form, the symbolic role of English as a marker of modernity and competitiveness remains consistent. As Saudi higher education continues to globalize, the digital linguistic landscape will remain a key site where aspirations, ideologies, and identities are publicly and performatively inscribed.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored how universities, using Saudi institutions as a case example, strategically deploy English and Arabic on their official websites to construct institutional identities within the evolving global landscape of higher education. Through a multimodal and comparative analysis of six universities, the findings demonstrate that language

choice in digital spaces is far from incidental. Rather, it is a conscious act of identity negotiation shaped by ideological priorities, national policy frameworks (such as Vision 2030), institutional mission, and imagined global audiences.

The analysis revealed a typology of linguistic strategies ranging from English-dominant (e.g., KFUPM, PSU) to Arabic-dominant (e.g., UQU), with some institutions adopting more balanced bilingual models (e.g., KSU, KAU). These distinctions were not merely lexical or navigational but semiotically encoded through layout, visual hierarchy, and discursive emphasis. Across all cases, English tended to dominate high-stakes content, such as rankings, internationalization efforts, research impact, and graduate studies, while Arabic was generally reserved for sections emphasizing cultural heritage, community engagement, and religious affiliation. This pattern reflects the dual imperative facing universities in the Global South: to project cosmopolitan academic legitimacy through English, while simultaneously maintaining cultural rootedness and institutional authenticity through Arabic.

The study contributes to existing literature on linguistic landscapes, EMI policy, and digital discourse by foregrounding the role of web-based platforms in institutional identity construction. It supports theoretical claims by Motschenbacher^[8] that university websites act as curated ideological texts; spaces where institutions do not just inform but also perform identity in response to global pressures. Additionally, the findings align with critical sociolinguistic theories, such as Canagarajah’s^[14] translingualism and Pennycook’s^[6] local practice paradigm, by illustrating how bilingualism in the Saudi context is both strategic and ideologically inflected.

However, this study is not without limitations. The analysis focused exclusively on static content from the English and Arabic versions of six institutional homepages and selected subpages. It did not account for user engagement, interactive content, or the experiences of website visitors, which may influence how language is perceived and interpreted in real time. Nor did it include longitudinal data, which could reveal how linguistic strategies evolve over time in response to shifting institutional goals or external pressures. Furthermore, while the sample was designed to capture diversity across university types (public, private, religious, STEM-focused), it may not represent the full spectrum of linguistic practices in the Saudi higher education sector or the broader Gulf region.

Future research can build on this study in several ways. First, there is a need for ethnographically informed digital discourse studies that examine how university stakeholders (administrators, faculty, students) perceive and engage with multilingual digital content. Second, comparative work across different national contexts in the Global South would offer valuable insights into whether the linguistic patterns observed here are regionally specific or globally consistent. Third, future studies could analyze multimedia elements, such as video content, social media integration, and infographics, to better understand how multimodality complements or complicates linguistic identity strategies. Finally, engaging with the perspectives of web designers and policy-makers involved in digital communications could provide a more nuanced understanding of the intentions, constraints, and power dynamics shaping language policy online.

In conclusion, the digital presence of universities offers a revealing lens into how institutions across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts navigate the dual imperatives of global academic engagement and local identity affirmation. The strategic use of language and visual design on institutional websites reflects not only branding choices but also underlying ideological orientations. As internationalization continues to shape higher education worldwide and digital platforms become integral to institutional communication, there is an increasing need for nuanced, context-aware research into how language and identity are constructed and communicated in online academic spaces.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study were derived from publicly available university websites, which are accessible with-

out restriction. No new datasets were generated or deposited. All materials analyzed are available in the public domain and can be accessed directly from the respective institutional websites.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest. AI tools were used solely to support language refinement and clarity. All content was generated under full human supervision, with the author maintaining responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work. AI served as a writing aid, not replacing scholarly judgment or original intellectual contribution.

References

- [1] Callahan, E., Herring, S.C., 2012. Language Choice on University Websites: Longitudinal Trends. *International Journal of Communication*. 6, 322–355.
- [2] Wächter, B., Maiworm, F., 2014. English-Taught Programmes in European Higher Education: The State of Play in 2014. Lemmens Medien GmbH: Bonn, Germany.
- [3] Jenkins, J., 2014. English as a Lingua Franca in the International University: The Politics of Academic English Language Policy. Routledge: Abingdon, UK.
- [4] Piller, I., Cho, J., 2013. Neoliberalism as Language Policy. *Language in Society*. 42(1), 23–44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404512000887>
- [5] Phillipson, R., 2009. Linguistic Imperialism Continued. Orient Blackswan Private Limited: Hyderabad, India.
- [6] Pennycook, A., 2010. Language as a Local Practice. Routledge: London, UK. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203846223>
- [7] Kumaravadivelu, B., 2016. The Decolonial Option in English Teaching: Can the Subaltern Act? *TESOL Quarterly*. 50(1), 66–85. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.202>
- [8] Motschenbacher, H., 2024. Contrasting a University's Language Policy with Its Linguistic Landscape: A Norwegian Case Study. *Current Issues in Language Planning*. 25(3), 237–265. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2023.2283652>
- [9] Deumert, A., 2014. Sociolinguistics and Mobile Communication. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, UK.
- [10] Hopkyns, S., Zoghbor, W. (eds.), 2022. Linguistic Identities in the Arab Gulf States: Waves of Change. Routledge: London, UK. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003149637>
- [11] Shohamy, E., Gorter, D. (eds.), 2009. Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery. Routledge: New York,

- NY, USA.
- [12] Block, D., 2007. *Second Language Identities*. Continuum: New York, NY, USA.
- [13] Norton, B., 2013. *Identity and Language Learning: Extending the Conversation*, 2nd ed. Multilingual Matters: Bristol, UK.
- [14] Canagarajah, S., 2013. *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*. Routledge: New York, NY, USA.
- [15] Yang, M., Wang, Z., 2023. A Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis of China's National Image Constructed by Environmental News in The New York Times. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*. 10, 545. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02052-8>
- [16] Yeung, M., Lu, V., 2018. English-Medium Instruction in Self-Financing Tertiary Institutions in Hong Kong: Views and Practices from the Students. *English Language Teaching*. 11(8), 28–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v11n8p28>
- [17] Smit, U., Dafouz, E., 2012. Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education: An Introduction to English-Medium Policies, Conceptual Issues and Research Practices Across Europe. *AILA Review*. 25(1), 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.25.01smi>
- [18] Barnawi, O., Alhawsawi, S., 2016. English Language Education Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Current Trends, Issues and Challenges. In: Kirkpatrick, R. (ed.). *English Language Education Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*. Springer: Cham, Switzerland. pp. 199–222. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46778-8_12
- [19] Mahboob, A., Elyas, T., 2014. English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Challenges, Opportunities, and Successes. *World Englishes*. 33(1), 128–142. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12073>
- [20] Fairclough, N., 2015. *Language and Power*, 3rd ed. Routledge: London, UK.
- [21] Fairclough, N., 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman: Harlow, UK.
- [22] Kress, G., van Leeuwen, T., 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. Routledge: London, UK.
- [23] Scollon, R., Scollon, S.W., 2004. *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet*. Routledge: London, UK. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203694343>
- [24] Gee, J.P., 2010. *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*. Routledge: London, UK. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203850992>
- [25] Lanvers, U., Hultgren, A.K., 2018. The Englishization of European Education: Concluding Remarks. *European Journal of Language Policy*. 10(1), 147–152. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/ejlp.2018.7>
- [26] Dimova, S., Hultgren, A.K., Kling, J., 2021. Englishization in Danish Higher Education. In: Wilkinson, R., Gabriëls, R. (eds.). *The Englishization of Higher Education in Europe*. Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam, Netherlands. pp. 143–162. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21ptzkn.10>