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# Representing a Coherent Brand out of Incommensurate Goals Représenter une marque de commerce cohérente à partir d'objectifs incommensurables

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## Representing a Coherent Brand out of Incommensurate Goals

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## **Representing a Coherent Brand out of Incommensurate Goals** **Représenter une marque de commerce cohérente à partir d'objectifs incommensurables**

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### **Abstract**

Through its website, Facebook, and Weibo page, the University of British Columbia (UBC) states its commitment to being a top-ranked and equitable institution. Using multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), we examined differences across the three platforms and found episodic attention to anti-racism and truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples on [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca); however, this attention was absent on UBC's Weibo page and less evident on its Facebook page. Conversely, statements concerning UBC's rankings were consistent and frequent across the three platforms. We draw on the concept of mediatization to analyze how time and online spatial separation of information create an illusion of a coherent narrative that encompasses the incommensurate goals of being a more equitable university while also being top-ranked, particularly to students from China. We conclude with the importance of providing prospective international students with an understanding of the place and sociopolitical and historical context in which they hope to study.

### **Résumé**

Par l'intermédiaire de son site Web et de ses pages Facebook et Weibo, l'Université de la Colombie Britannique (UBC) affirme son engagement à être une institution équitable de premier rang. À l'aide de l'analyse critique du discours multimodal (MCDA), nous avons examiné les différences à travers les trois plateformes et nous avons relevé une attention épisodique à l'antiracisme et à la vérité et la réconciliation avec les peuples autochtones sur [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca); cependant, cette attention était absente sur la page Weibo de la UBC et moins évidente sur sa page Facebook. En revanche, les affirmations concernant le classement de la UBC étaient cohérentes et nombreuses sur les trois plateformes. Nous puisons dans le concept de médiatisation afin d'analyser la façon dont les décalages d'information à la fois temporels et dans l'espace en ligne créent l'illusion d'un récit cohérent qui englobe les objectifs incommensurables d'être une université plus équitable tout en étant bien classée, en particulier pour les étudiants chinois. Nous terminons sur l'importance d'offrir aux futurs étudiants internationaux une bonne compréhension de l'endroit ainsi que du contexte sociopolitique et historique dans lequel ils comptent étudier.

**Keywords:** university rankings, equity, multimodal critical discourse analysis, mediatization

**Mots clés :** classement universitaire, équité, analyse critique du discours multimodal, médiatisation

## Introduction

We start by acknowledging the lands from where we are writing. Michelle Stack is writing from the traditional, ancestral, and stolen lands of the Musqueam Nation, which is today referred to as British Columbia. Her ancestors were from France and Ireland. She has noted that international students often feel ill-prepared for discussing settler colonialism in Canada and thinking about their positionality as international students. They talk about information from the University of British Columbia's (UBC) website and social media channels on topics such as weather, travel, and immigration to Canada. Absent is information about Canada as a settler-colonial nation or information about resources for students who experience racism and other forms of structural violence.

Jingwun Liang is writing from the traditional territories of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Chonnonton Nations, which is today referred to as Ontario. She is an international student who attends a public university in Canada. Her experiences and positionality as an Asian international student pursuing higher education in an English-speaking Canadian institution inspired her to reflect on the gap between her actual experiences and the narrative of a “study-abroad life” that the university website and social media represented. In stating our positionalities, we acknowledge the stolen lands from which we write this paper, our positions as uninvited guests and settler-colonizers, and our responsibilities to continue to challenge colonial thinking within ourselves and the institutions in which we are members.

UBC is a public, research-intensive higher education institution with campuses in Vancouver and Okanagan. What is particularly interesting to us is how different aspects of UBC's identity are communicated across three popular online spaces—Facebook, Weibo, and UBC's website—to prospective international students, who comprise an increasing percentage of the student body. In 2020–21, 21% of students who enrolled at the UBC Okanagan campus were international students. The number is even more significant at UBC's Vancouver campus, with international students comprising 37% of all graduate students and 25% of all undergraduate students. Notably, among the overall proportion of international students, Chinese students account for the highest proportion at both the undergraduate (42.5%) and graduate (27%) levels (Mukherjee-Reed & Szeri, 2021).

UBC, like many universities, spends time and resources to excel at international media-driven rankings, which amplify inequity (Hazelkorn, 2017). Also, like other universities, UBC is under increasing pressure to respond to its complicity in colonialism and ongoing structural injustice. For example, UBC released an Indigenous Strategic Plan in 2020 and stated its commitment to taking a leading role in “the advancement of Indigenous people's human rights” (UBC Indigenous Portal, n.d.). It has also stated its commitment to building international networks with a specific focus on China.

It is interesting to us which goals and plans are emphasized to prospective students through its website's homepage and social media, and more specifically, how tension and contradictions are expressed through communications. We explore this tension through the following question: How does UBC attempt to discursively cohere its goals around marketing to international students and social justice, as evident on its institutional website, Facebook, and Weibo pages?

We begin by providing a brief literature review to contextualize our analysis of UBC's marketing and equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments. Next, we draw on the concept of mediatization to theorize and ground our analysis. We then offer examples of how we have used multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) as a methodology to map and categorize social



media posts and contents on ubc.ca. Finally, we examine the continuous focus on rankings and prestige versus the episodic attention to settler-colonialism and Indigeneity.

## Literature Review

In an era of commodification and marketization of higher education, many universities have increased the resources they allocate to branding and marketing through their websites and social media (Miller-Idriss et al., 2019; Blanco Ramírez, 2018; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). In addition, Peruta & Shields's (2017) study found over 90% of postsecondary institutions in the United States consider social media crucial for recruiting prospective students and emphasize high rankings as evidence of quality, which seems likely in Canada as well. Given this context, social media has become an essential space of power with a substantial impact on social interactions and information distribution (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014; Rambe, 2012).

The reputational race has led to a plethora of national and international rankings (Hazelkorn, 2017), which are commonly used as external validators to communicate the perceived quality and prestige of the university (Larsen, 2016). Rankings impact student recruitment (Lynch, 2014), philanthropic and government funding (Badat, 2010), and immigration policy (Lloyd & Ordorika, 2021), and they are disseminated mainly through websites and social media. However, rankings are often criticized not just for what is included in ascertaining which institutions are world class but also for what they exclude from consideration. Major rankers rely heavily on either the Web of Science (owned by Clarivate) or Scopus (owned by Elsevier) citation indexes. Both indexes privilege journals that are part of their respective journal publishing oligarchies (Morrison, 2021; Robertson & Olds, 2017), and both also privilege scholarship written in English and coming from Global North countries (Kehm, 2014; Teferra, 2017; Tilak, 2016). Rankings are also critiqued for metrics that privilege wealthy universities which admit a disproportionate number of students from families in the top income quartile (Chetty et al., 2017; Kivinen et al., 2017; Smyth, 2017). Information about rankings is usually easily located on the homepage of top-ranked universities or in the "About" section (Stack, 2016); conversely, more difficult or contested topics are absent or require more searching and clicking through different navigation menus (Stack, 2021). Liang (2021), for example, compared and contrasted how UBC used its Facebook page and Weibo to market to prospective international students and unsurprisingly found that content about ranking and amenities was common, but conversations concerning truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples were far less present. Beck and Pidgeon's (2020) article addressed the importance of bringing together conversations about internationalization with stated commitments around respect for Indigenous people and decolonization of universities. They asked the key question, "What would the decolonization of internationalization policy and practice look like if we made respectful, equitable, and ethical relationships foundational to the policy framework and enactment?" (p. 397).

The late Michael Marker pointed to the contradictions of universities in claiming a commitment to Indigenous students and faculty while rigidly maintaining colonial constructs of knowledge and productivity. He elaborated on this in his last academic article:

The policies and processes of universities are not just caustic to Indigenous cultural goals, they have been unmistakably basic to the erasure of Indigenous places—including the environmental destruction of such places. (2019, p. 1153)

Most globally well-known universities in North America are located in Indigenous Peoples' unceded (aka stolen) territories (La paperson, 2017). Moreover, Smith et al. (2021) pointed to how diversity policies can erase "the fraudulent means by which universities were established" (p. 135)

and create a narrative of harmonious and fair settler-Indigenous partnerships. They showed how web-based marketing materials used by an Aotearoa university provide a “home away from home” (p. 142) narrative to appeal to settlers and migrants that marginalize the lived experience of Indigenous people and normalize capitalism, individualism, and dispossession. International students, like “domestic” students often come not knowing the history of who is inviting them to study and what this means for the Indigenous people of these lands. As Chan (2018) stated:

Newcomers and/or immigrants are prevented from negotiating their rights of residency with Indigenous Peoples. Instead, the legality of arrival/departure is subjected to the authorities of the settler-colonial state (e.g., the distancing of newcomers' relationships to Indigenous Peoples) ... I argue that regardless of intentions, non-white international students to Canada are settlers of colour in the making. (p. 753)

Bhandar, writing amid anti-Asian violence in British Columbia, asked in a forum on racism at UBC: “How do we strategically organize to confront anti-Asian racism that is rooted in settler colonial structures of power that have informed ... the foundations of our post-secondary institutions?” (Huynh, 2020). Grappling with Bhandar’s question requires a much more rigorous questioning of what it means to belong or not to belong to an institution founded on the ideology of colonialism. Estera and Shahjahan (2019) argued that rankings are grounded in a modern/colonial global imaginary, and that Whiteness should be considered as an “ongoing and unfinished history, which oriented bodies in specific directions” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 150). In other words, Whiteness has also become a metaphor for a “habit of being” (Coloma, 2013; Shotwell, 2016). This paper draws on the literature reviewed above to examine how UBC negotiates the tension to be a more inclusive and just institution while striving to excel at rankings which are arguably antithetical aims.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this paper, we use the concept of mediatization to provide a theoretical framework for examining how universities structure themselves to operate more on media norms of determining how to allocate resources, who and what is valued, and how information is shared. Universities, for example, that want to improve their ranking will increase spending on public relations (Barron, 2021). They will want their faculty to publish in English and in particular journals captured by the citation indexes used by key rankers (Chou, 2021). Universities with a focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) will fare better than those with a focus on social sciences or humanities. The Academic of World Universities Rankings, for example, bases 30% of its weighting on the number of faculty or alumni at an institution who have received a Nobel Prize and Fields Medals.

Mediatization is not about determining media effects but instead uncovering “a dialectic relation” (Hepp et al., 2018, p. 4). Media mould our communication practices and create new forms that change our practices. Mediatization is a framework for analyzing the construction of spaces as central to institutional and collective identities (e.g., top-ranked and diverse) that change based on relationship to other entities and identities (Robel & Marszolek, 2018). Couldry and Hepp (2018) pointed to large events such as the Olympics as examples of “deep mediatization” that continue to be “centralizing” but are maintained through new underlying forces that include data from multiple sources such as Facebook and Twitter and make use of algorithms.

Deep mediatization, Hepp (2020) argued, can only be understood through an analysis of interrelations within and across media. Indeed, he continued, the first step in understanding mediatization is “not media themselves, but the social domains and, in a second step, the role of

media in a domains' construction" (p. 100). Mediatization is a valuable concept in examining how universities use text and images consistent with ubiquitous media narratives around diversity and liberal multiculturalism as good for business. Buckner et al. (2021) analyzed the language of diversity and avoidance of attention to racism in strategy documents produced by 62 higher education institutions focused on international students. The authors analyzed what is absent and dominant in representations of diversity and found that different nationalities and images of "seemingly different racial and religious groups mingling, smiling, and celebrating together" (p. 41) were common. The similarity in visual images across multiple universities and contexts points to the influence of mediatization. The pictures do not align with academic research concerning the role of higher education in reinforcing racism; instead, the images support media imagery of the idealized student—young, normatively attractive, and without visible disabilities.

## Methodology

This study uses MCDA as the methodological framework for our analysis of the UBC website and UBC's Facebook and Weibo pages. The audiences for the UBC website are multiple. In contrast, UBC's Weibo page is aimed at prospective international students from China. Based on the content, the Facebook page (e.g., information about admissions) appears to be aimed at students both domestically and internationally. We paid attention to what aspects of UBC are highlighted through the hyperlinks provided by UBC staff on its Weibo and Facebook pages. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) analyzes "how social power is produced, reproduced and sustained through discourse" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough, 2001; Fairclough et al., 2006; Mayr & Machin, 2012). CDA is particularly helpful in uncovering the discursive reproduction of ideologies (Molina, 2009; Pauwels, 2012).

MCDA expands the use of CDA to encompass multiple semiotic resources, including websites and social media. Text are not mirrors of reality but representations and recontextualizations of social practice. For example, rankings are representations of excellence that are recontextualized on university websites, often along with images of happy students and beautiful landscapes to represent individual success and a desirable lifestyle.

Our analysis compares and contrasts this recontextualization process across the [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) homepage and its Facebook and Weibo pages. We coded data based on:

1. Location (e.g., prominence of information about rankings as compared to the history of the exclusion of Indigenous people at UBC and racism at the university).
2. Positioning (e.g., at the top or in small print at the bottom of the page).
3. Framing (e.g., who is front and centre in the background? What types of students are presented in focus or close-up in the images?)

Through this process, we analyzed legitimation strategies used on different platforms. We coded for the legitimation function of information provided (e.g., legitimation of UBC as world class, legitimation of UBC as an equitable institution). We looked at how imagery was used at different times based on the sociopolitical context (e.g., images of Totem poles). Universities' marketing is mainly through websites that link to multiple pages and other sites, including popular social media. Our interest in bringing our research projects together was to analyze the integration of three popular means of marketing—the UBC website and its Facebook and Weibo pages—to compare and contrast how UBC discursively represents its identity to different audiences, particularly around rankings and social justice. All three platforms are used for marketing; however, form and audience impact their function as marketing tools.

When we searched the terms “UBC” or the “University of British Columbia” on the Facebook search engine, several affiliated Facebook groups and fan pages showed on the search result, including student clubs, alumni groups, and prospective undergraduate student groups. Similar to Weibo, when we searched the school name on its search engine, several affiliated Weibo accounts showed on the result, including the Vantage College Weibo page and Sauder Business School Weibo page. In this study, we chose “University of British Columbia Facebook” and “AskUBC 大学” (abbreviated as AskUBC in this study) for data collection and analysis. These social media pages are operated by the university rather than specific university-affiliated interest groups.

In this paper, we bring into conversation Michelle’s analysis of the UBC website over the last 10 years and Jingwun’s analysis of UBC’s Weibo and Facebook pages. Analysis of different platforms brings with it challenges. Website content is often replaced, while Facebook content stays on the page unless taken down by the owner. Michelle has studied the UBC website for 10 years and she uses archival tools such as Wayback. Through this process, she analyzed what content is constant on the page (e.g., ranking) and paid attention to issues that appear to be driven by external media coverage of an event (e.g., the murder of George Floyd). Michelle has employed MCDA to analyze UBC’s homepage and content related to rankings since 2013. Jingwun analyzed UBC’s Facebook and Weibo pages from May 1, 2019 to May 1, 2021. This paper focused on the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which included March 11, 2020 to March 11, 2021.

### ***Data Sources: Facebook, Weibo, and the UBC Website***

Facebook has over 2.9 billion active users (Statista, 2022, July 28). However, most Chinese people cannot access or use foreign social media such as Facebook and Twitter inside Mainland China. Weibo is a popular Chinese microblogging social networking site with more than 580 million active users (Statista, 2022, June 22). It is one of the largest social media platforms worldwide, and Chinese people are the primary users. In addition, many universities use Weibo to engage with prospective Chinese international students and their families. AskUBC Weibo is the official Weibo page of UBC, created on July 4, 2013. It had 8,881 followers during the data collection period (April 5, 2020). UBC’s Facebook page was created on June 17, 2008, and it has 281,723 followers as of the data collection period (April 5, 2020). UBC’s Facebook and Weibo pages provide links to the UBC website of particular interest to prospective students, for example, application deadlines and admission information. Applicants apply online through the application portal; they also apply for awards and connect with faculty through the UBC website.

### **Analysis and Findings**

We identified three themes that figured prominently across the three media platforms: (1) rankings and world class; (2) the beauty of UBC and belonging; (3) spatial separation: rankings and equity. This section discusses the prominent themes we identified across the three platforms with examples that ground our analysis and findings.

#### ***Rankings and World Class***

Navigation links at the top and bottom of the [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) landing page are relatively stable, but the images and highlighted content changed and often reflected media events. Rotating photos and collages created representations of a world-class institution, responsive to societal needs and caring for its students; for example, in April 2020, an image of the coronavirus was prominent on the website with a story about how UBC’s research is at the forefront of finding vaccines. Other photos

showed that UBC is not just about research but is also a caring community; for example, an image of a distressed-looking young person, a caring university president, and happy young people alongside tips on how to get active were shown. Across the three platforms, information about rankings was prominent. For example, the UBC Facebook page stated: UBC is a “global centre for research and teaching” and in the “top 20 public universities in the world.” Following information about rankings, UBC’s motto and mission stated: “inspiring people, ideas and actions for a better world” (UBC Facebook, April 2020). On all the platforms, hyperlinks to external sites further validated UBC’s high rankings (Figure 1). Statements about rankings appeared alongside assurance that UBC “inspire(s) people, ideas and action” to lead to a “better world.”

**Figure 1: Screenshot of the Post on UBC Facebook (April 22, 2020)**



Weibo posts also highlighted the prestige of the university; UBC “ranks 38th in the latest Academic Ranking of World Universities (also known as Shanghai Ranking)” and was “named one of the best academic schools in the world” (AskUBC Weibo, 2020, September 22). The visual strategies on Weibo focused on photos demonstrating a high quality of life (e.g., new cozy dormitories, comfortable libraries full of resources with students focused on studying). The [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) page presented a similar story of prestige and excellence visualized through well-dressed, able-bodied students in settings that included greenery, ocean, traditional academic quads, and new technology. Readers were told that “The University of British Columbia is a global centre for teaching, learning, and research, consistently ranked among the top 20 public universities in the world.” And that “UBC embraces innovation and transforms ideas into action. Since 1915, UBC

has been opening doors of opportunity for people with the curiosity, drive, and vision to shape a better world” (ubc.ca, About UBC).

Across the three platforms, UBC presents its specific ranking, interviews with leaders about rankings, and external links to direct the audience to rankers’ websites, which act as external validators for rankings as a valid tool to help students make good decisions.

### ***The Beauty of UBC and Belonging***

Visualizing UBC’s past through archival images was shared across the three platforms. Two Facebook posts included a bird’s eye view of the UBC Vancouver campus in 1930 (UBC Facebook, 2020, March 12) and an online archival collection of campus life in 1958 (UBC Facebook, 2020, November 19), for example, were featured across postings from the UBC Archives Historical Photograph Collections. Historical photos were often shown alongside information about rankings, which provided a narrative of longstanding stability and excellence. UBC’s Facebook page and Weibo “About page” (The University of British Columbia, n.d.) centred on the same aerial photo of the modern campus buildings alongside an old clock tower. Trees and grass surround the building with a uniform, vibrant green hue, wide sidewalks, and a view of the Pacific Ocean and mountains (Figure 2). Underneath were links for the UBC website, contact information, and a place to leave questions. The image promotes a “tourist gaze” (Shahjahan et al., 2021)—a place of uncomplicated beauty and wide-open spaces for those chosen to enjoy.

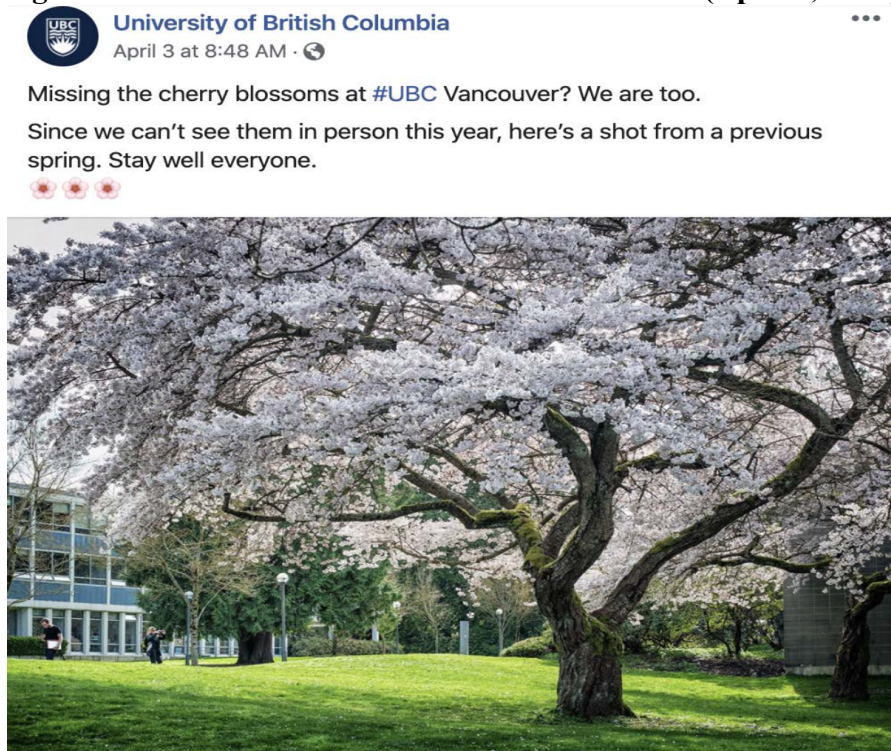
**Figure 2: Screenshot of the UBC Facebook “Home” Page (April 5, 2020)**



Also ubiquitous were images of community, natural beauty, and fun despite the pandemic including images of the cherry blossom trees on campus in the spring (Figure 3) and a snowball fight at the UBC Main Mall (Figure 4).



**Figure 3: Screenshot of the Post on UBC Facebook (April 3, 2020)**



**Figure 4: Screenshot of the Post on UBC Facebook (April 8, 2020)**



AskUBC Weibo page used close-up images of happy-looking students of Asian descent enjoying conversation with other students who appear to be of diverse ethnicity on campus (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Screenshot of the Photo on AskUBC Weibo (June 11, 2020)**



Weibo and Facebook posts implied and promoted the “study-abroad dream” as providing valuable “life experiences” to prospective international students. For example, photos on Weibo suggest opportunities to interact with domestic and international students from diverse regions and the chance for multicultural experiences. However, absent is information about food and housing precarity in Vancouver that may impact and pose potential challenges to international students when transitioning to life in Canada. Nevertheless, students in the photos throughout these posts appear to be having fun.

Presentations of the beauty of UBC and fun on campus, such as the cherry blossom tree in the springtime and the lively student activities, communicated a sense of belonging along with the text message like “missing UBC.” They also portrayed the lifestyle of the UBC community through telling visual stories that feature interactions among peers in nature (e.g., the snowball fight). The photos showed a vibrant campus and a sense of belonging for students as a seamless package. Statements about rankings appeared alongside the assurance that UBC “inspire(s) people, ideas and action” to lead to a “better world.”



**Figure 6: Screenshot of the AskUBC Weibo Front Page (April 5, 2020)**



In addition to the cover photo on the front page of AskUBC Weibo (Figure 6), five revolving shots presented a carefree lifestyle (e.g., images of students laughing and drinking coffee). In addition, photos showed students of Asian descent interacting with White students.

Finally, the UBC's Facebook and Weibo pages referred audiences to [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) and other university-affiliated web pages. For example, the AskUBC About page introduced the function of the Weibo page as a platform for news and updates for prospective undergraduates from the UBC student recruitment team. Notably, the "more information" link provided hyperlinks to UBC's Vantage College (UBC Vantage College, n.d.), which has substantially higher tuition fees than regular UBC programs and is for international undergraduate students who do not meet UBC's English language requirements. In addition, there were links to the UBC Sauder Business School official Weibo page, and the [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) Undergraduate Programs and Admissions web page (The University of British Columbia, n.d.). These links provided by Weibo point to the importance of marketing these particular sites to UBC as key to recruiting international students from China.

### ***Spatial Separation and Equity***

We noted images of totem poles on campus and pictures of the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre figure, which both figured prominently across the UBC website and Facebook posts (University Archive Blog, n.d.). UBC Weibo posts presented photos of the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) building, images of totem poles, and tourist attractions that communicate the beauty and uniqueness of the UBC campus, but less common is the text that provides context to these images; therefore, it is likely that upon entering the UBC campus for the first time, students will recognize the totem poles but not the context for land acknowledgments provided at UBC events and the discussions about the need for UBC to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) recommendations concerning the need to decolonize higher education and address the complicity of educational institutions in residential schools.

At the time of our analysis, an explanation of the images concerning UBC's role in colonialism and residential schools was lacking on Weibo but was present on [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) (Ward, 2018) and Facebook. It is not surprising that materials marketing UBC as a gateway into a land of opportunity do not emphasize information on its role in the settler colonial state, but it does mean

international students arriving at UBC have been given little if any opportunity to understand the context in which they are studying. Unlike information about rankings which requires no searching, finding materials about Canada's role in settler colonialism requires prior knowledge. Those interested in or knowledgeable about the topic would, for example, know to search for "UBC" and "residential schools" or "UBC" and "TRC."

We did note that [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) included an acknowledgment of the unceded and ancestral lands of the Musqueam First Nation on which UBC is built, but it was separated from UBC's excellence and its story of origin. To find more information about UBC's past and current relationship with the Musqueam people and other Indigenous people in Canada requires knowing what key search words to use (e.g., "Residential schools" or "Indigenous Portal"). Conversely, information about rankings and reputation requires no searching. The lack of information does raise questions around the ethics of preparing students to engage in opportunities to learn the context they are coming into and to think through their positionality within the context.

On May 25, 2020, 2 months after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, and the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, which led to protests around North America and statements of solidarity by governments, businesses, media, religious, health, and educational institutions, UBC leaders acknowledged systemic and institutional racism in Canada and encouraged readers to act through attending events (e.g., anti-racism workshops) or to avail themselves of individual support offered by UBC (e.g., mental health services). UBC's then-President Ono released a statement in June 2020, "Together Against Racism and Injustice," to show solidarity and commitment to fighting racism at UBC:

As a university, we need to make it crystal clear that racism and bias have no place in our community and that we have zero tolerance for it ... incidents of anti-Black and anti-Asian racism and the continued racism and oppression that is directed at Indigenous communities. We must work together to dismantle the tools of oppression and white supremacy that remain prevalent and entrenched in our everyday systems. (Ono, 2020, June 1)

The statement started with a familiar pattern of "bias" and "zero tolerance," which focused on individual acts rather than university structures that play a role in oppression. However, the sentence that followed was a departure from the common language of "unconscious and implicit bias" that represents racism as acts of individual ignorance rather than systemic violence. It is important to note what information was easily located on the [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) "About" page and what was challenging to find. For example, the first paragraph on the "About" page told the reader that UBC is top-ranked, and images alongside this information pointed to natural beauty (The University of British Columbia, n.d.). There was no mention of racism or other forms of injustice, but under "UBC Institutional Highlights," we found a link to "Inclusive Excellence" and links to statements on anti-Asian racism and an anti-racism taskforce; however, this was further down the page than information about UBC's global rankings.

We could not find easily identifiable hyperlinks on the "About" page. For example, to find Ono's statement, the audience needs to know the title of the press release or go through the following steps: (1) go to the homepage; (2) search for the Office of the President webpage; (3) click "Communication" on the navigation bar to find the Statements to the University Community and (4) explore the archive to find the press release.

Over the 3 weeks following Ono's "Together Against Racism" statement, UBC's Facebook page included three posts regarding UBC's commitments to anti-racism. The first post was a statement of solidarity and commitment to fighting racism at UBC, with a hyperlink for audiences to access [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) Office of the President to see the UBC statement of anti-racism (UBC Facebook,

2020, June 1). Another post included a video message from President Ono talking about anti-racism, emphasizing UBC's efforts and commitment (UBC Facebook, 2020, June 19). Finally, another post included links to the Office of the President web page on which President Ono announced that he would establish a UBC-led advisory committee on systemic racism at UBC (UBC Facebook, 2020, June 16).

In addition to the three posts regarding the university leader's statement of solidarity and commitment to fight against anti-racism, the UBC Facebook posts included commentary from students and faculty members. For instance, in late February 2020, a Facebook post shared an article (which was still being retweeted and shared on the UBC Facebook page during our data collection period) written by Dr. Heidi Tworek, an assistant professor in the History Department, which (UBC Facebook, 2020, February 28) pointed out that the history of empire and colonialism were deeply intertwined with narratives of race and disease. This article provided a critical perspective to review and respond to the COVID-19 issue and the growing anti-Asian racism across North America and some European countries. Another post included a link to the UBC news about a UBC student, Oludolapo Makinde, working with the City of Vancouver as a Healthy City Scholar to develop an anti-Black racism strategy for Vancouver (UBC Facebook, 2020, June 17).

On Facebook and the homepage, we noted content that focused on how UBC responded to increased anti-Asian racism, but this content was largely absent on Weibo. On June 1, 2020, the same day that [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) and UBC Facebook released President Ono's statement of anti-racism, there was a Weibo post discussing how to choose elective courses strategically. The post provided a hyperlink to the [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) Student Service life blog web page for audiences to read the article written by a UBC alumnus who shared his experience of choosing elective courses (AskUBC, 2020, June 1). Other topics covered on Weibo included university rankings (AskUBC, 2020, June 6), international students' experiences (AskUBC, 2020, June 11), and UBC students who designed low-cost ventilators to contribute to improved air quality to mitigate the impact of the pandemic (AskUBC, 2020, June 23). There appears to be an assumption by UBC that international students need practical information but not the understanding of the settler-colonial context of which UBC is a part and how they might play a role in maintaining the status quo or changing it.

UBC's Facebook page included several discussion posts regarding issues of racism, including links to UBC's statements of solidarity and commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion; however, such statements were absent on a media platform targeting Chinese audiences (i.e., Weibo). Such differences also revealed the assumption that most international students (especially from China) pay more attention to the university's global ranking performance, international reputation, and study-abroad life. There is notable absence of postings related to racism, equity, and the context of truth and reconciliation with Indigenous communities among broader Canadian societies on Weibo. The information provided treats prospective students as consumers rather than prospective members of a community that is reckoning with UBC's role in colonialism, climate collapse, and the pandemic.

Finally, there has been substantial research, for example, conducted by UBC scholars about racism in Canada, including racism at UBC (Henry, 2015; Yu, n.d.), racism in the prison system (Arbel, 2019), healthcare (Denison et al., 2014), and housing (Mawani et al., 2003); however, it was not research that resulted in institutional statements of solidarity and commitments to anti-racism. It was media attention and large-scale protest that led to UBC and other universities to publish statements in solidarity. The episodic, media-driven attention to racism raises questions around the marginalization of anti-racists academic research.

Our analysis points to the substantial resources UBC puts into communications and promoting the UBC brand. Stories about rankings were the most common across the three platforms, but [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) did provide space for stories that acknowledged racism at UBC and the need to act to dismantle it. These stories are important to share with prospective students as part of truth and reconciliation and to ensure students have networks of support and care to respond to racism. Our analysis also points to information about TRC and racism as available on the website, but to access it requires using search terms that require prior knowledge of context, for example, knowing that Canada has a legacy of residential schools and anti-Asian racism. Communications to international students could provide this information to ensure students have a sense of context upon arrival and the knowledge of where to receive support in responding to racism.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

We began this paper with interest in understanding how arguably incommensurate aims of education are expressed through institutional communications. UBC, like other highly ranked universities has disproportionate wealth when compared to other institutions. The question is how a focus on rankings impacts the ability of UBC and institutions like it to respond to racism. For example, scholars doing community-engaged research require time to build relationships before publishing, and research that requires publishing in open-source journals that are not likely captured by one of two databases used by major rankers would likely be seen as unproductive at an institution that focuses on maintaining or increasing its rankings.

Our interest is in expanding conversations, particularly with international students. Information about rankings was prominent, stable, and easily located across the three platforms; conversely, information about inequity tended to be episodic (after horrific violence covered by corporate media) and was prominently displayed on its website and Facebook page for a short period. Experiences and knowledges of Indigenous people in Canada were symbolically demonstrated through visuals of physical structures and episodic apologies.

Mediatization provided a framework to understand the greater visibility given to rankings as compared to research done by UBC researchers concerning the need to restructure higher education in Canada to move forward on commitments around social justice. Logics of media are grounded in episodic coverage that makes what is constant (racism) and rankings of universities newsworthy. Research that points to patterns and recommends structural change does not fit within such a framework.

Across the platforms, there was ubiquitous use of the UBC's logo and scenic images of the campus, a mix of traditional academic quads, greenery, happy students with technology, and UBC's standing in global rankings. The logo provided the brand name and reinforced the brand value through rankings and students who appeared satisfied with their choice to attend UBC. We noted that visual representations of people of Asian descent in comfortable dorms and other spaces were common. Evident was a narrow visible diversity that included cheerful professors and happy young students without visible disabilities. We did note that on the [ubc.ca](http://ubc.ca) homepage and sometimes on Facebook, there were statements of solidarity regarding equity, UBC's settler-colonial history, and racism, but not on Weibo.

Across all platforms, we noted the need for prior knowledge to search for content about UBC's history and current context concerning colonialism and racism. On the one hand, UBC, like many other universities, speaks about commitments to social and climate justice and global citizenship, but on the other hand, to be highly ranked requires wealth, and where that wealth

comes from is not of concern to major rankers. For example, many highly ranked universities have acquired wealth through the military-industrial-academic complex (Giroux, 2007). We recognize the need for more study that includes multiple sociopolitical, historical, and language contexts to better understand how universities communicate coherence.

We started this paper by acknowledging the lands our respective institutions of study and work are located—lands that were stolen from Indigenous Peoples to build institutions from which they were excluded. We recognize that we are critical of a university from which we have benefitted as uninvited guests/settler-colonizers. We hope that in deconstructing the contradictions, we can provide students opportunities to consider what they see as a good education in a settler-colonial state and what this means for how they understand the context in which they are studying.

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