



# Websites as institutional imaginary positionings

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**Abstract** The paper contributes to methodological innovations in the field of organisational education research and further education. The paper shows the potential of discourse-analytical website analysis for the imaginary positionings of Higher Education Institutions. It offers a discourse analytical research methodology and discusses University websites as surfaces of emergence of specific discourses. Discourse-analytical website analysis is especially significant as universities' visually rich web-based communication is becoming increasingly critical. Our journal article reflects on websites as institutional imaginary positionings: First, we start by theorising organisations as orders of the gaze. Second, from a discourse-analytical power/knowledge based organisational education perspective, we make fruitful Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge for a multimodal website analysis. Third, we map the field and state the art of methods and methodologies of website analysis, including examples from a current research project on how transversal themes are represented on university websites. Our article contributes to methodological innovation through discourse-analytical website analysis in the field of organisational education and further education.

**Keywords** Websites · Discourse analysis · Imaginary · Higher education · Gender · Sustainability

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## Webseiten als institutionelle imaginäre Positionierungen

**Zusammenfassung** Der Zeitschriftenartikel leistet einen Beitrag zu methodischen Neuerungen im Bereich der organisationspädagogischen Forschung sowie Weiterbildungsforschung. Der Beitrag zeigt das Potenzial der diskursanalytischen Webseitenanalyse für die imaginären Positionierungen von Hochschulen. Er bietet eine diskursanalytische Forschungsmethodik an und diskutiert Hochschulwebseiten als Oberflächen des Auftauchens spezifischer Diskurse. Die diskursanalytische Webseitenanalyse ist von besonderer Bedeutung, da die visuell reichhaltige webbasierte Kommunikation von Universitäten zunehmend an Bedeutung gewinnt. Unser Zeitschriftenartikel diskutiert Webseiten als institutionelle imaginäre Positionierungen: Zunächst theoretisieren wir Organisationen als Ordnungen des Blicks. Zweitens machen wir aus einer diskursanalytischen, macht- und wissensbasierten Organisationspädagogikperspektive Foucaults Archäologie des Wissens für eine multimodale Webseitenanalyse fruchtbar. Drittens geben wir einen Überblick über das Feld und den aktuellen Stand der Methoden und Methodologien der Webseitenanalyse, einschließlich von Beispielen aus einem aktuellen Forschungsprojekt, wie transversale Themen auf hochschulischen Webseiten dargestellt werden. Unser Artikel leistet einen Beitrag durch diskursanalytische Webseitenanalyse zu methodologischen Innovationen im Bereich der Organisationspädagogik und Weiterbildung.

**Schlüsselwörter** Webseiten · Diskursanalyse · Imagination · Universität · Hochschule · Geschlecht · Nachhaltigkeit

### 1 Introduction

Poststructural research perspectives highlight the performative character of organising in an economy of attention. This trend is identified as well for and within the academic field. In a global space of competition, academic capitalism (Münch 2014; Slaughter and Leslie 2001) is discussed. Within this global space of visibilities and speakabilities in academia, rankings (Brankovic et al. 2018; Hazelkorn 2011) are core for positioning academic institutions into a space of productivity, competition and accountability (Powell 2018). In such a global space of positionings and the academic field, epistemic structures of science may relate to traditional “natural elite” positions of and within academia. They may connect to strategies of “striving” academic institutions, which try to catch up and establish within global academic markets (Wieners and Weber 2020). Within such epistemic strategies, academic institutions might as well try to transform into platform-based strategies between universities, industry and government, as Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) identified this trend already early in 2000 with their triple helix approach. The global “performative turn” does not only force individuals but also academic institutions into a world we might call positioned “singularities” (Reckwitz 2021).

This paper is interested in the implications of this performative turn for organisational research and the relevant implications for research methodologies. In response to the call, our paper, therefore, contributes to methodological innovations

in the field of organisational research. The paper intends to show the potential of a discourse-analytical website analysis as a methodology for analysing institutional imaginary positionings of and within academia and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A discourse-analytical approach to website analysis is relatively rare in the literature. Most website analysis use content analysis, but only a few use discourse analysis (Maasen et al. 2006; Weber et al. 2019b).

Our journal article reflects on websites as institutional imaginary positionings, building upon the article “Das Netz der Organisation und seine Oberflächen” (Weber et al. 2019b) and the project “Re-imagining GenderFuture in STEM”<sup>1</sup> (2023–2026). It asks how discourse-oriented methodologies can support analysing the digital performative discursive practice of universities and uses the example of the playing out of cross-cutting themes such as gender and sustainability.

From the methodological perspective, we start by saying that the websites of HEIs can be seen as “surfaces of emergence” of organisational discourse (Weber and Wieners 2018).

First, we start by introducing the field of organisational education, theorising organisations from a Foucauldian power/knowledge perspective. We also discuss the relationship between discourse research and organisational studies, introducing the epistemology of the gaze. Second, we introduce Foucault’s (1972) Archaeology of Knowledge and multimodal analysis before we map the field and state the art of methods and methodologies of website analysis, including a concrete example of how to analyse transversal themes, as exemplified in the above-mentioned research.

## 2 Discourse-analytical organisational education research

Education scholars have established and internationally widened the field of organisational education over nearly two decades. Organisational research perspectives are interested in the learning *within, of and between organisations* (Göhlich et al. 2014, italics added). Organisational education “refers to educational as well as non-educational organisations” (Göhlich et al. 2014, p. 96). It is primarily interested in “organising”, mainly focusing on analysing organisations from cultural and process-oriented perspectives (Weber et al. 2019a). Therefore, research strategies connect to the “performative turn” in educational research and refer to phenomenological, ethnographical and hermeneutical research traditions (Weber and Wieners 2018). Recent theoretical perspectives reconstruct organisations in terms of a relational perspective, as discussed subsequently.

### 2.1 Organisations from a discourse-analytical and an aesthetics perspective

Following Foucault, organisations are interwoven by powerful knowledge regimes which are discursively constituted, leading to particular organisational orders. Truth/Power can be understood as a set of rules distinguishing the true from the false. Knowledge is transported within discourses and devices (Jäger 2012). Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

the power/knowledge of an organisation comes into view as a “complex strategic situation” (Foucault 1977, p. 1098, own translation) that “runs through the apparatuses and institutions without being bound to them to be” (ibid, p. 1101, own translation). Since knowledge is always thought of discursively, it is also generative for organisational practice. In this sense, power/knowledge is not understood as repressive but as “productive” (Foucault 1976b, p. 249).

Foucault (1978, p. 119) sees the dispositive as a heterogeneous ensemble that includes discourses, institutions, architectural devices, regulatory decisions, legal frameworks, administrative measures, scientific positions, and philosophical, moral, or philanthropic judgments, producing the dispositive as a pattern of order and a network (ibid, own translation). From this angle, it is about how power/knowledge runs through organisations “productively”.

For example in the field of adult and continuing education, the relations between organisation and change from a discourse-analytical perspective have been analysed in five relational patterns. Weber (2018) first identifies an early ‘emergent static’ pattern, where organisations have been understood as boundary, limitation and opposite of change, conceptualized as the pedagogical. The second relational pattern of ‘endogenous development’ positions organisation as a framing condition of pedagogical change. The third one, named ‘exogeneous selection’ discursifies organisations within a pressured becoming within and triggered by external forces like New Public Management and neoliberal strategies. The fourth relational pattern connects change to learning and reflexive organising in structural embeddings and relations of tensions. A fifth relational pattern is identified in change as designing desired futures—and in this sense as pedagogical organising. As we can see in this example, these relational patterns and dispositives of organisational change in adult and further education from a Foucauldian perspective, bring about discursive organisational spaces of “speakabilities” and “visibilities”. In organisation research, Strati (2000) made the claim for an aesthetic research perspective on organisations and organisational dynamics.

Aesthetic perspectives become relevant as well in the philosopher Castoriadis’ (1975) seminal work “*L’institution imaginaire de la société*”. He understood society—and organisations—as imaginary institutions, operating at the level of the symbolic and imaginary (Castoriadis 1975, p. 217). Castoriadis (1975) discusses the collective imaginary in its reproductional as well as transformational potential. Foucault himself referred to art historian Panofsky, as his art historian iconographic-iconological method embeds in historical conditions and epistemic knowledge cultures.

Panofsky (2006) developed a threefold method for analysing and classifying images. He suggested the steps of a pre-iconographical description, an iconographical analysis and an iconological interpretation (Panofsky 2006, p. 41). With his iconology approach, Panofsky (2006) intended to analyse the symbolic value of images and relates to epochal and epistemic contexts.

Art-historian Imdahl (1996) with his image-philosophical Ikonik widens this perspective from iconography and iconology to Ikonik and claims to not only identify the given in “recognizing seeing” (wiedererkennendes Sehen), but in a dialectical process to transform the perspective into a specific and fresh seeing of the piece of

art as such. By analysing specific aesthetic structures in a piece of art (*erkennendes Sehen*), he claims the individuality of a work of art rather than the collective patterns to be identified here. Such a “seeing seeing” for Imdahl (1996) intends to go beyond the iconographic and iconologic dimension and supports a visual structural analysis.

Referring to the Foucauldian (1972) term of discourse, Knorr-Cetina (1999) extended this term to “viscourse”. Although discourses are also visual, as Iedema (2007) points out, the viscourse concept intends to make the visual dimension of discourses more explicit. “The term ‘viscourse’ intends to emphasise interplays of visual representations and their embedding in an ongoing communicative discourse” (Knorr-Cetina 1999, p. 247, own translation). Researching knowledge cultures in the research field of physics, she showed, that the way of seeing of the researchers brings about the researched object—as well in its visualizations. She highlights the importance of visualisations for forming power/knowledge constellations because illustrations have a rhetorical character of proof (cf. Mersch 2006). Hence, patterns of perception can be examined as orders of seeing, and in this way, the practice of seeing as a practice of production becomes more explicit.

So far, we state that organisations can be theorised and analysed as discursive and imaginary institutions, where the collective imaginaries may relate to reproductional as well as transformational power/knowledge in organisational orders of the gaze. For this article, we focus on the reference horizon of the discursive organisation, notably the HEIs and how they are permeated by discourses, such as those of gender and sustainability. Next, we ask after the relationship between discourse research and organisational education research.

## 2.2 Discourse research in further education and organisational studies

The terms discourse and discourse analysis have not only experienced increasing usage in the social sciences in recent years, but are also relevant for adult education research, as discussed by Rausch (2012) and organisational education. Discourse analytical research approaches have been established in both fields and contribute to a power/knowledge analytical research perspective (Göhlich et al. 2014; Weber and Wieners 2018; Weber et al. 2019b).

Within the poststructuralist turn, we can find broad and narrowly defined understandings of the concept of discourse (Alvesson and Karreman 2000). Similarly, the discourse terms of the “organisational discourse” discussion (Grant 2008) and adult education (Schäffer and Dörner 2012) are diverse: they range from the analyses of power and knowledge (Burrell 1988) to ethical positions, such as the understanding of discourse ethics following Habermas (Meisenbach 2006).

Foucauldian discourse analytic perspectives are highly relevant for organisational education research methodologies, adult and further education as well as website analysis. They are interested in the “discursive practices through which bodies of knowledge are constituted, truth claims are legitimised, and orders of thought, saying, and truth are established” (Weber et al. 2019b, p. 85, own translation). Moreover, they focus on programmatic and semantics (Göhlich et al. 2014), discursivities, actors, and frameworks of organisational learning regarding epistemic practices (Weber 1991, 1998, 2013b; Weber 2005). They examine the ‘surfaces of the emergence’ of

discourse lines within organisations concerning their underlying rationalities (cf. Foucault 1977).

Starting from the question ‘Who speaks?’, discourse-analytical perspectives help to analyse discursive, social and organisational power/knowledge complexes, analysing the material visual positionings as well as the multiperspectivity and systematic speaking positions of actors (Weber 1991), highlighting speaker positionings and (organisational) subjectivations as well as processes of legitimation and imagination as a discursive organisational practice. As such, they help to examine the dynamics of the regular emergence and production of dominant and marginalised knowledge and subject positions. Alternatively, they can start from the genealogical analysis of social movement knowledge and identify the shifts in the ‘surfaces of emergence’ in organisational development (Weber 1998). On the ‘surfaces of emergence’, discourse lines within a dispositive can run in opposite directions (Foucault 1976a, p. 1105).

So far, our article has discussed the relationship between discourse analysis and organisational education research. Our methodological focus is showing how a discourse-analytical website analysis contributes to the field of organisational education research and research methodologies (Weber et al. 2018). Summarising, discourse-oriented organisational research is thus interested in analysing orders of power/knowledge and studies speaking positions and rationalities in, for example, discourses of equality (Weber 1991), organisational development (Weber 1998), or as in our case, the implications of sustainability in STEM on gender. The term discourse has been extended by its visual dimension. The next section discusses organisations in terms of gaze orders, as they are relevant for how organisations or HEIs respectively are permeated by discourses of equality, diversity, gender and sustainability in their collective imaginaries and the institutionalized discursive ‘gaze’ on students, for example.

### 2.3 Epistemology of the gaze

We conceptualise gaze orders, returning to Foucault’s (1976b) book “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”. He describes the gaze order as the act of observing and being observed. The institutionalised discursive gaze can be understood as a historical, temporally and spatially situated practice (Rimmele and Stiegler 2012, p. 40). According to Foucault, the process of normalisation, exemplified in the panopticon, is the fundamental characteristic of all institutions of modern society. In Velazquez’ “Las Meninas”, Foucault (1976a) analysed the representative gaze as a monument of discourse and visual order, exemplified in the representation of the Spanish royal couple looking into the mirror and simultaneously everyone is looking at them (cf. Prinz 2014, p. 144). The mirror and the door already indicate the new light order of modernity which places the focus on the human subject as seeing (the person on the doorstep) and the seen (the royal couple) (cf. Prinz 2014, p. 74). While the visual dispositive of representation, disciplining, normalisation, and imagination refers to a relational ontology, the institutionalised gaze is an organiser of situated practices as well as organisational forms and conceptions of human governance (Balke 2011; Wieners and Weber 2021).

As shown, seeing, perceiving, looking and imagining becomes relevant in organising. Analysing websites as collective visual representations and as performative artefacts in organising contributes to analysing “orders of (un-)awareness” and contributes to an epistemology of the (institutionalised) gaze. Public representations, such as websites, can be analysed regarding how they performatively do ‘viscourse’ by referring to specific cultural patterns or stereotypes. Such ways of referencing to collective (re-)productional imaginaries contribute to the subjectivation of individuals, collectives and organisations, too. This perspective thus questions the institutionalised practice of seeing and perceiving (Wieners and Weber 2021) and reflexively interrogates it for the conditions of the possibility of seeing—and of the orders of the gaze involved here.

As suggested by Strati (2000), an aesthetics research perspective on organisations throws into sharp relief aesthetics notions of organising compared to a rationalist view of organisations. From this perspective, poststructuralist analysis unfolds the potential of an aesthetic epistemology, conceiving seeing and perceiving as cultural and societal practices. Similarly, Mersch (2006) proposes a visual epistemology, suggesting that images are genuine methods of generating knowledge and, thus, part of epistemic interest, whereby image and language have equal weight. Discursive procedures help to create and “verify” truth claims on the one hand, whereby “evidence” is produced through image processes on the other (Mersch 2006).

The ‘epistemology of the gaze’ asks for the materialisations of symbolic orders of the gaze. Such aesthetics-oriented organisation research contributes to visual research methodologies, which from an epistemological perspective ask for the conditions of institutionalised seeing. Analysing websites as ‘surfaces of emergence’, we now introduce the Archaeology of Knowledge and multimodal analysis as a methodology and a method of website analysis to examine the organisational “dispositives” that organise discourse.

### 3 Methodologies and methods of website analysis

#### 3.1 Archaeology of knowledge

Drawing on Foucault’s (1972) Archaeology of Knowledge, we consider primary/real, reflexive and discursive relations for analysing website. Primary/real relations refer to the institutional units; reflexive relations refer to scientific and political rationalities; and discursive relations refer to discourse-analytical relations (Foucault 1972). At the primary/real level, we reconstruct the ‘surfaces of emergence’, e.g. the structures, indexes, links and bifurcation but also the programmatic and semantics to understand the rationalisations underlying the organisations. Furthermore, we analyse the “systematic position of the subject” and the analysis of the “types of utterance” in the organisational discourse. Therefore, we take a closer look at the “formation of the modalities of utterances” and subject positions (cf. Table 1, second column). Based on the question: “Who speaks?”, we examine the “institutional places”, from which the discourses become effective. We analyse these modes of

**Table 1** This table was developed in the context of a previous research project on gender and excellence (Wiener and Weber 2020; Weber et al. 2019)

Formation of the objects: Objects	Formation of the utterance modalities and subject positions	Formation of the terms	Formation of the Discursive Strategies	Organisation of the discursive formation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Objects and programmatic</li> <li>- Surfaces of emergence, instances of demarcation.</li> <li>- Who is addressed and symbolised?</li> <li>- According to which rules are the objects formed of which the discourses speak?</li> <li>- Which academic disciplines are involved? → reflexive relations</li> <li>- Which classification patterns are used?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who is the legitimate speaker, or from which institutional locations and subject positions is an object spoken about?</li> <li>- Who can say something reasonable under which conditions?</li> <li>- Positions of the subject: What places can the addressed subject occupy?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What knowledge is brought into existence, and how?</li> <li>- How are text elements connected? Which rhetorical schemes are used?</li> <li>- Which terms structure the discursive field? How are they used? (different terms that contradict each other overlap historically and are detached in their structuring function)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discursive Formations</li> <li>- Regulated ways of using discursive possibilities</li> <li>- Theoretical principles of order and constitution of the different segments of a discursive formation</li> <li>External references of a discourse:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What are the themes and theories of the discourse?</li> <li>- How do they relate to other discourses?</li> <li>- What is the function of a discourse?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conditions of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coexistence</li> <li>- Maintenance</li> <li>- modification</li> <li>- of disappearance</li> </ul> </li> <li>Regularities and limitations that determine what may be said in discourse</li> </ul>



systematic production and subjectivation concerning the “sequence and arrangement of the sequences of utterances” (Foucault 1992, p. 83, own translation).

Second, at the level of “reflexive relations”, it is a matter of embedding these “surfaces of emergence” of discourses in disciplinary and conceptual strategies in academia. Therefore, it is a matter of analysing the “formation of concepts” and the “formation of strategies” (cf. Table 1, third and fourth column): thus, discourses give space to certain “conceptual organisations, regroupings of objects, types of statements”. They form themes or theories according to their degree of coherence, rigour, and stability (Foucault 1992, p. 94, own translation). This analytical level helps us to describe a discursive formation in its dimensions or crossing points, such as sustainability or gender.

The final level, the discursive relations, establishes the connection between the first and the second, analysing the relations between the statement and the space of differentiation. We examine the “principle of distribution of objects in a discourse” (cf. Table 1, first column) and the “discursive formation” (cf. Table 1, fifth column) (Foucault 1992, p. 111, own translation).

Analysing these three levels leads to the development of organisational “dispositive” that organise discourse (Weber 2013a, b, 2014; Weber et al. 2019b). In summary, the dispositive-analytical approach follows four questions that build on one another.

- “Who speaks?”: who are the speaking discursive positions, which knowledge is legitimately produced here, and which is marginalised?
- Second, where does this knowledge emerge: what are the “surfaces [of] emergence” (Foucault 1972) of this body of knowledge?
- Thirdly, which subject positions are produced in the organisation’s knowledge of power?
- Based on this, the last step is how knowledge is assigned its place (Weber and Wieners 2018).

### 3.2 Multimodal analysis of discourse practice

Due to the multimodal character of websites, discursive website analysis and multimodal analysis of discourse practice go hand in hand (Iedema 2007; Lažetić 2020). In the multi-level structure of organisational change dynamics, multimodal analysis of organisational discourses is necessary, which includes the pictorial, composition and design, technological aspects, architecture and all materialities. Such an object-related methodology can be used for the material analysis of specific rationalisations (Keller and Truschkat 2013; Weber 1998).

Multimodality integrates text- and image-based approaches, videos, and physicality, conceptualising websites as three-dimensional spaces. The means of textual, pictorial, creative and acoustic elements (Iedema 2007) in the design and layout of the website make visible the emerging discourses and performative practices. Similar to Iedema (2007), Meier (2013) proposes examining discursive practice as a multimodal practice in the interaction of different sign systems or modalities. Focusing on discursive positions and actors in their modality, mediality, and signification helps to

ask how and in what way “sign resources” create understanding in communication processes. Furthermore, it responds to the question of to what extent they are conventionalised within discourse communities, e.g. contextual uses of colour and form (logos, websites, etc.). Accordingly, he understands discourses as regulating and regulated multimodal sign usages that lead to exemplary communication practices (ibid.).

Next, we map out the field of website analysis, describing the foundational perspectives on websites as multimodal platforms and introducing empirical strategies and findings from the literature before we discuss how specific topics are negotiated, such as gender and sustainability.

## 4 Websites and website analysis

### 4.1 Foundational perspectives on websites and website analysis

Website analysis is one approach among visual research methods (Lažetić 2020). While the research in organisational education has paid attention to the visual turn in the practice of social research for a while (Bell et al. 2014; Weber et al. 2014), further and adult education (Friebertshäuser 2007; Schäffer and Dörner 2012) as well as higher education research have been hesitant to consider two crucial methodological and epistemological twists, namely the visual and digital. Analysing still images are rare in their application and in their methodological reflection in qualitative-empirical adult education research (Dörner 2012). Moreover, “[t]he lack of visual research in the study of higher education has been particularly evident in Europe due to the combined effects of two research traditions”, Lažetić (2020) argues; namely, the focus on management, organisation and quality and the tendency to consider national state and national higher education systems as the primary unit of comparison. However, website analysis is especially significant as universities’ visually rich web-based communication is becoming increasingly critical (Lažetić 2020; Metcalfe and Blanco 2019).

Websites are a coherent and aesthetically unified ensemble of pages whose data is localised on a server. They are one of the most important forms of online representation for textual, visual and acoustic information (Schünzel and Traue 2014). Websites are digital documents created transmedially, consisting of forms, texts and images, which appear as two-dimensional, multicoloured presentation areas on the screen. They are usually structured hierarchically via a navigation bar. In addition to the internal reference structure, they often have an external reference structure in which they refer to other websites or social media, for example. Due to their hyperstructure, websites can be analysed as a three-dimensional, spatial structure. Analysing the external reference structure is vital because it provides information about legal, financial or symbolic connections with other actors (Schünzel and Traue 2014).

According to Schünzel and Traue (2014), websites have at least three functions: self-thematisation, networking and appeal character. Accordingly, they first allow individuals, groups, or firms to represent themselves. Second, they provide for com-

municative actions, e.g., networking or collective action. They can be understood as a triadic structure since websites mediate objectification between the actors. They are carriers of process-produced data and have an inherent communicative function. This allows one to move between archived and dynamic content or documents, which makes regular data back-ups in the analysis process unavoidable. Still, websites are distinct from blogs or guest books, for example, because of their static, relatively stable structure over time and the limited technical possibilities for communication between visitors and webmasters. Thirdly, websites have linguistically and practically speaking an appealing character when they ask, for example, to comment, contribute, subscribe, buy or sign (Schünzel and Traue 2014).

Against this foundational perspective, we see organisational websites as publicly effective stage and organisational platforms for strategically selected content and self-portrayals (Weber et al. 2019b). Studying HEI's websites from a discourse-oriented organisational education perspective, we are interested in the surfaces of emergence and the imaginaries created and displayed, giving clues to the symbolic order of the organisation (Weber et al. 2019b). Metcalfe and Blanco (2019) suggest categories of difference for analysis like organisational, subgroup or self-identities and their relations, administration and governance, structure, aesthetics, environments, culture, change and technology.

According to Lažetić (2020), the analysis of websites also has particular challenges which need to be considered: it is the multimodal character of websites, as previously discussed, the co-creative nature through multiple authors and the dynamic nature of the websites as well as the lack of adequate archiving practices. As such, websites can be analysed as an "ensemble", as a specific image-text-arrangement, which as such "perform" an institutional surface of emergence (Weber et al. 2019b). Moreover, we remain aware of the fact that websites are created by professional agencies. The commercial aspect of websites and its relevance for self-presentation are important aspects when analysing websites.

## 4.2 Empirical website-analysis strategies & findings

In the following, we discuss some selected papers using website analysis to provide an outlook of selected methodologies on how HEIs present themselves and which surfaces of emergence appear. For example, Gronert et al. (2018) examine homepages of public and private universities offering further education as homepages play a central role in the recruitment of people interested in continuing education. In using a content-analytical document analysis and a deductively developed standardized category, they explore the question what information is available on a homepage and to what extent. Presenting information in a clear and comprehensible way forms the core of a targeted approach in order to attract target groups effectively.

In a paper specific to HEIs, Lažetić (2020) focuses on the methodological potential of institutional website analysis as a fruitful approach to studying difference in comparative higher education research, looking at different purposes of comparison and different organisational aspects of HEI's website representations. He found that most website analysis of HEIs are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal and remain within national boundaries, limiting potential theoretical insights into social, polit-

ical and organisational change processes across societies. Interestingly, the cross-sectional representations focused on issues related to institutional identities and positioning of individual self-identities towards institutions and on representations of different types of students. In contrast, organisational aspects related to structure, hierarchy, disciplinary differences, management and leadership, among others, are rarely covered (Lažetić 2020).

From a Foucauldian perspective, Maasen and Böhler (2006) examine the relationship between image and text on the “Zeppelin University” (ZU) website. The analysis focuses first on the university as an institution, analysing the symbolic orders of chosen landscape pictures, for instance, from the Alpes, suggesting confrontation and conquest, and the Lake Constance, implying positionality and reflexivity of the viewer. Images of landscapes hide the university (situated in the observer’s blind spot); instead, they show the university’s geographic location and ideal perspective; “The visitor to the website [...] sees the world through the eyes of the ZU.” (Maasen and Böhler 2006, p. 216). This analysis reminds Foucault’s deliberation of the Las Meninas, as previously discussed, in that the image shifts the gaze of the observer.

Second, Maasen and Böhler’s (2006) book chapter examines the social figures, notably the president and employees, represented as models rather than university bureaucrats. The people portrayed appear as authenticating, charismatic social figures of the managerial-academic type. The website of ZU is a form of ideological modernisation: on the one hand, the social figure of the president reflects the conquering spirit of the namesake Zeppelin; on the other hand, he represents the manager as a response to the socially necessary reaction to the current economic and labour market situation. They conclude that turning to the image helps to analyse the image-discursive connections and shifts of new sayings and visibilities and to record them in practices of will and knowledge formation. The image becomes an event whereby the internal dissection allows the external relationships of intelligibility to be constructed (Maasen and Böhler 2006).

Overall, the website analysis of the ZU via images and texts makes it possible to see the type of university and the ways of subjectivation in differences, in which specific patterns of visibility and sayability emerge. In the outlook, we illustrate how a discourse-analytical website analysis can be made fruitful to examining the discourses of gender and sustainability in HEIs.

### 4.3 Outlook: website analysis and transversal themes: sustainability & gender

As we focus on HEIs, we view them as a particular form of organisation, shifting from state-led to more market-oriented models in the context of the neoliberalisation of higher education and globalisation, more broadly (Parreira do Amaral and Thompson 2022; Slaughter and Leslie 2001). Against this background, organisational change arises as a question of the transformation of organisational orders of the gaze and dispositives of the gaze.

Over the last decades, the topics of sustainability and gender have been emerging and have become more prominent in the public sphere (Priestl 2018; Wahlström 2019; Weber et al. 2020). Website analysis can help analyse how organisations position themselves towards transversal themes, such as sustainability and gender. For

instance, in the context of a research project on “Re-imagining GenderFuture in STEM” in German Higher Education funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung*, BMBF), we depart from the assumption that focusing on sustainability in STEM/Tec study programmes widens participation for female students, particularly from non-academic or migrant families. By analysing the interplay of text, e.g. gender, sustainability and their synonyms within the broader discourses, visuals (e.g. use of colour, graphics, pictures) and sounds (if any) help to deconstruct how those transversal themes are addressed and which gaze orders they imply, which is supported by the literature in the field.

Gomaa et al. (2014) introduce a scoring tool for websites to analyse the sustainability marketing efforts of companies. They pay attention to sustainability issues and website quality, examining whether they are user friendly, transparent and which content (sustainability concepts and efforts) is conveyed. A further paper by Isaksson and Johnson (2013) proposes a preliminary model for assessing university sustainability from perspectives of students. Starting from the assumption that a student is looking for a university working with sustainable development, their study uses website analysis of 18 Swedish universities. Although Sweden can be considered a leading nation in sustainability, the results from the website analysis are not as promising as the ranking does not seem to predict university sustainability performance.

From an empirical angle, Leal Filho et al. (2018) examined the extent to which universities have formal policies on sustainable development, and whether such policies are a pre-condition for successful sustainability efforts. In a mixed-methods study, covering 35 universities in seven countries, ranging from document and website analysis to questionnaires and interviewing, they found out that only 60 per cent of the sampled universities had a specific policy. Still, all of the universities were active by developing environmental sustainability policies or procedures. The findings provide some valuable insights into the connections between sustainability policies and practices by means of website analysis. In an in-depth study by Ott et al. (2016), corporate, nonprofit, and university websites were examined how they communicate sustainability online. They analysed sustainability on the landing pages of the actors mentioned above, comparing the different organisational actors. They state that “sustainability has emerged as a core business strategy and a focal area of investigation among communication scholars” (Ott et al. 2016, p. 672). Interestingly, nearly all universities had a designated sustainability landing page on their website, compared to only a few nonprofits in the sample. Still, they suggest that the selected organisations promote only selected content without quantifying their sustainability claims.

With respect to gender, a paper by Moss, Gunn & Kubacki (Moss et al. 2008) explores the relationship between gender and web design from a web design aesthetics approach. They are interested in the theoretical and practical implications of the question of how best to identify and sustain service brands values. To do this, they use web design aesthetics in how small to large companies represent themselves. They find that most websites employ a “male design aesthetic”, suggesting that women and men have differential design aesthetics. Accordingly, there are im-

plications for recruitment, promotion and training that are not currently reflected in existing services branding models (Moss et al. 2008).

These implications are essential for our previously mentioned BMBF project as we consider how the universities' websites call particular students into action to study with them. Our primary interest is how sustainability can be a door opener for previously marginalised target groups in STEM/Tec study programmes. We are interested in the question to what extent Green STEM can be a "door opener" for acquiring and retaining female STEM students in society (Spangenberg 2016)<sup>2</sup>. To do so, we analyse the organisational discourses of two HEIs using the discourse-oriented document and website analysis (Weber et al. 2019b), paying attention to how and which type of student is represented in images, analysing the institutional orders of the male gaze.

Revisiting our dispositive-analytical approach from Sect. 2, we first ask who are the speaking discursive positions and which subject positions are produced in the organisation's knowledge of power. For instance, in one HEI, the website uses images of three students; two can be read as male students and one as female<sup>3</sup>. The male students sits cross-legged on the grass, while the female student sits outside on a bench with a table. Referring to Youdell (2005), we interpret this positioning as gendered sitting. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of subjectivation and the subsequent work of Judith Butler, Youdell (2005) analysed the posture of students in London's secondary schools. She stated that those postures are highly gendered, with female students taking less space, and hiding sexuality through closed cross-legged positions, while male students taking more space through positioning arms and legs around them.

While one male and one female student have a somewhat "mainstream" appearance, one of the male students is represented as particularly alternative, having dreadlocks, a woollen jumper, and his gaze oriented towards a point outside of the image, perhaps looking into the future. As Foucault's (1976a) discussion of Velazquez's (Foucault 1976a) "Las Meninas", where the mirror and door symbolise shifting the gaze, the gaze outside the image on the one hand and the different positioning of the student on the other, could indicate that the HEI changed its institutional gaze on the students.

We are also interested in the "surfaces [of] emergence" (Foucault 1978, 1992) of sustainability and gender discourses and how knowledge is assigned its place (Weber and Wieners 2018). Green dominates two of the three pictures, notably concerning the cloth and the background. The dominance of green, the nature-like location (at least in two cases), and maybe even the material of fabric (woollen and cotton), which do not suggest to be newly bought, may imply dimensions of sustainability. The student's statement emphasises the craft of the images, naming sustainability explicitly or framing it implicitly through nouns, such as future, responsibility, and planet, alluding to the Greta Thunberg movement and Friday protests, for example. Our examples demonstrates how discourses and images are joined together in discursive

<sup>2</sup> as formulated as a goal by the BMBF STEM field of action, field of action 3.

<sup>3</sup> In the following, we use male/female for a male/female read student acknowledging that the person themselves may identify differently.

sive chains. This preliminary analysis further suggests that institutional imaginary positionings might helpfully be thought in terms of constituting constellations that create both possibilities and constraints for the institutional gaze on and one hand and ‘who’ students can be, on the other.

Summing-up, our project looks at the relationship of those transversal themes in analysing websites as surfaces of emergence. Revisiting our analogy of surfaces of websites, we suggest that websites are permeated by discourses, such as sustainability in the entanglement with gender. Using particular images with diverse identities and statements, implying sustainability, environment, planet and future, among others, they performatively actualize collective imaginaries. As we have seen in the above example, websites may as well try to disrupt with dominant images, such as those of the “white male engineer” (Paulitz et al. 2015; Prietl 2018; Wolfram 2022). Instead, they address a different type of student through images, maybe those they hope to attract through ideas of sustainability.

Our article generally contributes to methodological innovation through discourse-analytical website analysis in organisational education and adult education organisation research. The paper showed the potential of a discourse-oriented website analysis as a methodology, adding to the literature on the epistemology of the institutional gaze. With its explicit methodological focus, it could not provide an empirical analysis on universities’ self-representation or transversal themes but rather show how a discourse-analytical approach to website analysis can be made fruitful for an in-depth empirical analysis.

Building upon the recommendations of Metcalfe and Blanco (2019) and Lažetić (2020), we encourage more “critical examinations of organisation identities and deeper understanding of diversity and inclusion/exclusion mechanisms in higher education contexts” (Lažetić 2020, p. 86). In this regard, a deepened understanding of organisational discourse formation and its “surfaces of emergence” might offer a potential and fruitful research area in the future.

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