



Strategic Public Relations as a Driver of Institutional Positioning and Competitive Advantage in Higher Education

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Abstract :

This study aims to analyze the role of strategic public relations management in enhancing institutional positioning and competitive advantage in higher education. Employing a qualitative approach with a multi-case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving institutional leaders, public relations practitioners, academics, students, and alumni. The findings indicate that strategic public relations serves as a foundational mechanism for institutional positioning through public needs analysis, identity strengthening, and integrated communication strategies. Furthermore, integrated communication encompassing media relations, digital branding, academic publications, and stakeholder engagement plays a critical role in shaping institutional image and reputation through message consistency. Strategic public relations also contributes significantly to competitive advantage by fostering public trust, increasing institutional visibility, and strengthening differentiation. The study implies that strategic public relations functions as a dynamic capability that links internal institutional quality with external public perception, transforming communication into strategic value. These findings offer theoretical contributions by integrating public relations, positioning, reputation, and competitive advantage into a unified framework, while practically providing guidance for higher education institutions in designing effective strategic communication to enhance competitiveness in a dynamic environment.

INTRODUCTION

The higher education sector has undergone a significant transformation in the era of globalization, marked by intensified competition, rapid expansion of digital communication, and increasing public demand for quality and accountability (Dwitasari et al., 2025; Phillips & Jones, 2025). This transformation highlights the growing importance of how universities position themselves in a competitive, highly visible public sphere. The reason lies in shifting stakeholder expectations, which no longer evaluate institutions solely on academic output but also on reputation, visibility, and perceived credibility. Empirical evidence suggests that institutional success is increasingly influenced by public trust and communication effectiveness rather than purely internal academic performance (Denner et al., 2025; Stoica et al., 2025). In this context,

communication management, particularly public relations (PR), plays a crucial role in bridging institutional performance and public perception (Anton et al., 2025; Kiambi et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding the strategic role of public relations becomes essential not only for institutional development but also for ensuring the relevance and sustainability of higher education in society.

Despite the growing importance of communication in higher education, many institutions still struggle to translate their internal strengths into external recognition effectively. Universities often focus heavily on improving academic quality but lack strategic approaches to communicate these achievements to the public. This creates a gap between institutional performance and public perception, leading to under-recognition and limited competitive positioning. The problem is further exacerbated by the increasing complexity of stakeholder expectations, where prospective students, parents, and the wider community demand transparent, accessible, and engaging communication. Without effective public relations strategies, institutions risk losing visibility and credibility in an increasingly competitive environment. Furthermore, communication practices are often fragmented and reactive rather than strategically planned, limiting their long-term impact on institutional reputation and competitiveness. This condition indicates a structural problem in how communication is managed within higher education institutions, underscoring the need for a more integrated, strategic approach to public relations.

This issue becomes more evident in regions with a high concentration of higher education institutions, where competition is particularly intense. In such environments, universities must compete not only in academic quality but also in how effectively they communicate their strengths and differentiate themselves from others. The presence of numerous institutions within a limited geographic area creates a dynamic competitive landscape, requiring them to construct their identities and reputations actively. Empirical observations indicate that universities increasingly rely on digital platforms, media exposure, and stakeholder engagement to enhance their visibility and attract prospective students (Amoozegar et al., 2025; Haddad-Adaimi et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies significantly depending on how well they are integrated and aligned with institutional identity. This phenomenon reflects a broader global trend in which institutional success is influenced by reputation, visibility, and stakeholder trust rather than solely by academic outputs. As a result, communication has become a critical determinant of institutional competitiveness.

Previous studies have explored public relations in higher education from various perspectives, emphasizing its role in communication and reputation management. Research on public relations strategies highlights the importance of media relations, digital communication, and stakeholder engagement in shaping institutional image (Albergo et al., 2025). Other studies focus on the role of communication in building trust and reputation, suggesting that consistent and transparent messaging enhances institutional credibility (Liu & Duarte, 2025). Additionally, positioning studies underline the importance of differentiation and identity formation in competitive environments (Kethüda & Bilgin, 2025). These studies collectively demonstrate that communication plays a significant role in influencing public perception. However, most of this research tends to examine public relations as a functional or operational activity rather than as a strategic managerial process embedded within organizational decision-making.

Despite these contributions, existing literature remains fragmented and limited in explaining how public relations contributes to long-term competitive advantage. Many studies focus on isolated dimensions such as branding, digital engagement, or media strategies without integrating them into a comprehensive framework (Majid et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is a lack of research that conceptualizes public relations as a strategic capability that links internal institutional resources with external perception (Andersson, 2025; Tolossa et al., 2025). Methodologically, most studies rely on single-case designs or quantitative approaches, which limit the depth of understanding of how communication strategies operate in real institutional contexts. This creates a significant gap in the literature, particularly in understanding how integrated communication strategies simultaneously contribute to positioning, reputation, and competitive advantage. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing a more holistic understanding of strategic public relations in higher education.

This study addresses the identified gaps by proposing an integrative framework that positions public relations as a strategic capability in higher education. The novelty of this research lies in its ability to connect strategic public relations, institutional positioning, reputation, and competitive advantage within a unified conceptual model. The research problem focuses on how strategic public relations contributes to (1) institutional positioning, (2) image and reputation formation, and (3) competitive advantage enhancement. This study argues that public relations functions as a dynamic capability that transforms internal institutional resources into external competitive value through strategic communication processes. By integrating communication strategies such as media relations, digital branding, academic publication, and stakeholder engagement, institutions can strengthen their differentiation and visibility. The study contributes theoretically by advancing an integrated framework and, practically, by providing strategic insights for higher education institutions to enhance competitiveness in a dynamic environment.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative, multi-case study design to examine in depth the role of strategic public relations in enhancing institutional positioning and competitive advantage in higher education (Robert K. Yin, 2008). A qualitative design was chosen because it enables a contextual, holistic, and in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena within real organizational settings, particularly in exploring the dynamics of institutional communication strategies. The multi-case approach enables comparative analysis across different institutional contexts, allowing identification of patterns, similarities, and variations in public relations practices within competitive environments. This design is considered appropriate as it provides richer empirical insights and strengthens analytical generalization compared to a single-case approach.

The research was conducted at two higher education institutions located in Jember, Indonesia. These institutions were purposively selected based on their differing institutional characteristics (public and private) and their strategic roles within a highly competitive higher education environment. Selecting these sites enables a deeper understanding of how institutional context shapes the design and implementation of public relations strategies. By examining two distinct cases within the same regional setting, this study allows for contextual comparison while maintaining relevance to similar competitive environments in higher education.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants, including institutional leaders, public relations practitioners, academic staff, students, and alums, to capture diverse perspectives on communication strategies and institutional positioning. An observation was conducted to examine actual public relations practices, including media management, digital communication, and stakeholder engagement. Documentation analysis was used to complement primary data by drawing on institutional reports, publications, and digital content relevant to communication strategies.

Table 1. Research Informants

Code	Institution	Position/Role	Category
I1	UIN KHAS Jember	Vice Rector	Leadership
I2	UIN KHAS Jember	Head of Public Relations	PR Practitioner
I3	UIN KHAS Jember	PR Staff	PR Practitioner
I4	UIN KHAS Jember	Lecturer	Academic
I5	UIN KHAS Jember	Student	Internal Stakeholder
I6	UIN KHAS Jember	Alumni	External Stakeholder
I7	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	Vice Rector	Leadership
I8	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	Head of Public Relations	PR Practitioner
I9	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	PR Staff	PR Practitioner
I10	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	Lecturer	Academic
I11	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	Student	Internal Stakeholder
I12	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	Alumni	External Stakeholder

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model proposed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data into meaningful categories and themes. Data display was carried out through narrative descriptions and matrices to facilitate interpretation and pattern recognition. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted iteratively to ensure the validity and consistency of findings. To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, audit trail, and peer debriefing, thereby enhancing the credibility, dependability, and rigor of the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study reveals three major findings regarding the role of strategic public relations management in enhancing institutional positioning and competitive advantage in higher education.

Strategic Public Relations as a Foundation for Institutional Positioning

Strategic public relations in this study is found to serve as a fundamental foundation in shaping institutional positioning through a systematic and structured process. Based on interviews with institutional leaders at Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, public relations is not merely a communication tool but is actively involved in strategic decision-making processes. One informant stated: *"We do not only deliver information, but we design how this university is perceived by the public through every communication activity we conduct."* (I1).

This finding indicates that public relations has evolved into a strategic managerial function within the institution. Observational data further confirm that the public relations unit is involved in planning academic programs and institutional publications in a structured manner.

Furthermore, interviews with the head of public relations reveal that institutional positioning is developed through public needs analysis and audience segmentation. The informant stated: *"We map the needs of the community, especially prospective students, and then align our communication messages with our academic strengths."* (I2). This finding highlights that communication strategies are audience-centered. Observations show that institutional digital content consistently emphasizes academic excellence and program strengths as key messages. Based on the research findings, the strategic public relations process in building institutional positioning can be illustrated as follows:

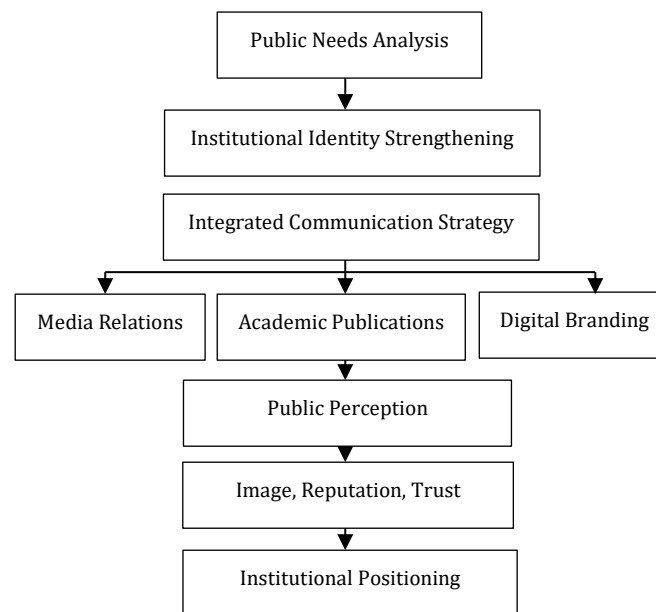


Figure 1. Model of Strategic Public Relations in Building Institutional Positioning

Figure 1 illustrates that strategic public relations begins with public needs analysis as the foundation for communication strategy formulation. This is followed by strengthening institutional identity, which serves as the core message in communication activities. The integrated communication strategy is then implemented through various channels, resulting in public perception in the form of image, reputation, and trust. These perceptions ultimately shape the institutional positioning in the minds of stakeholders. At the implementation level, public relations staff emphasized the importance of message consistency in building institutional identity. One informant stated: *"All the content we publish consistently emphasizes that this university excels academically and upholds strong Islamic values."* (I3). This reflects a systematic effort to maintain communication consistency. Observations indicate that messaging across different platforms is relatively uniform, reinforcing a coherent institutional identity.

Meanwhile, at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, positioning strategies demonstrate a different approach. Based on interviews with institutional leaders, the university emphasizes differentiation through innovation and community engagement. The informant stated: *"We want to be recognized as an innovative university that is close to the community, not only academically strong but also socially relevant."* (I7).

This finding reflects a differentiation-based positioning strategy. Observations show that community service activities and student innovations are prominently featured in communication outputs. In addition, the head of public relations highlighted the use of storytelling in communication strategies. The informant explained: "We focus on telling stories about student achievements and social activities so that the public can see the real impact of the university." (I8).

This approach enhances emotional engagement with stakeholders. Observational data indicate that social media content is dominated by visual storytelling related to student activities and social contributions. From the academic perspective, lecturers emphasized that institutional reputation is also built through academic contributions. One informant stated: "Scientific publications and academic activities are essential in building public trust in the quality of the university." (I4/I10).

This indicates that positioning is not only shaped through communication but also through academic performance. Observations show an increasing trend in the publication of academic activities and research outputs. Students, as internal stakeholders, also confirmed the significant role of digital communication in shaping their perceptions. One informant stated: "I first became aware of this university through its active social media presence showcasing student achievements." (I5/I11).

This finding highlights the strategic importance of digital media in shaping awareness and initial perceptions. Observations confirm that social media serves as a primary communication channel for institutional promotion.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that strategic public relations functions as a mechanism that connects institutional identity with public perception through a structured process. Institutional positioning is formed through the integration of public needs analysis, strategic communication, and message consistency.

Integrated Communication Strategies in Building Institutional Image and Reputation

The findings reveal that the implementation of public relations strategies is carried out through integrated communication activities, encompassing media relations, digital branding, academic publication, and stakeholder engagement. These communication activities are not implemented in isolation but are systematically interconnected within a comprehensive communication framework.

Based on interviews with the head of public relations at Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, it was emphasized that communication strategies are deliberately designed to ensure alignment across various channels. The informant stated: "We ensure that all communication channels, whether media, social media, or institutional publications, convey consistent messages about the university." (I2).

This statement indicates that communication integration is intentionally managed as part of a strategic effort. This reflects the application of integrated communication strategy where message consistency strengthens institutional image. Institutional platforms display similar narratives emphasizing academic excellence and institutional credibility.

Furthermore, digital communication plays a central role in shaping institutional visibility. Interviews with public relations staff revealed that social media is used as a primary tool for engaging with the public. The informant stated: "Social media is our main channel to reach prospective students and the wider community because it is fast and interactive." (I3).

This indicates a shift toward digital-centered communication strategies in higher education. Social media accounts are actively updated with content related to achievements, events, and institutional activities, demonstrating high engagement levels. Based on the findings, the integrated communication strategy in building institutional image and reputation can be illustrated as follows:

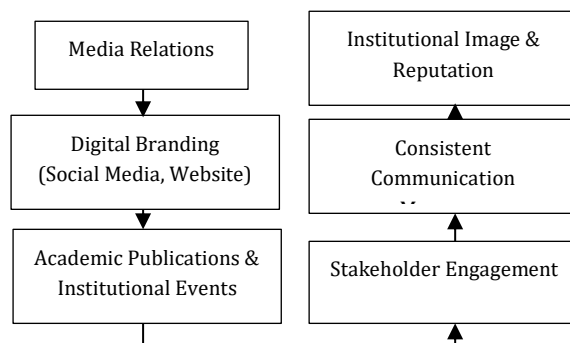


Figure 2. Model of Integrated Communication Strategies in Building Institutional Image and Reputation

Figure 2 illustrates that integrated communication strategies comprise interconnected activities, including media relations, digital branding, academic publications, and stakeholder engagement. These activities collectively produce consistent communication messages, which contribute to the formation of institutional image and reputation. In addition to digital communication, academic publications and institutional events were identified as key components in strengthening institutional credibility. A lecturer stated: “Academic publications and scientific activities are important because they show the intellectual strength of the university.” (I4/I10).

This finding highlights that institutional reputation is not only built through promotional communication but also through academic performance. Institutional media frequently publish seminars, conferences, and research outputs, reinforcing academic credibility.

Moreover, stakeholder engagement is a crucial element in building institutional reputation. Interviews with stakeholders indicated that active interaction between the university and the community enhances trust. One informant stated: “We feel closer to the university because it often involves the community in its activities.” (I6/I12).

Engagement strengthens relational trust between institutions and stakeholders. Community service programs and collaborative activities are prominently featured in institutional communication channels. Consistency in communication also emerged as a key factor in shaping public perception. Informants emphasized that consistent messaging enhances institutional credibility. One public relations officer stated: “If communication is consistent, people will trust the institution more because the message is clear and stable.” (I8).

Message consistency contributes to trust-building and the stability of reputation. Communication content across platforms reflects uniform themes, strengthening institutional identity. From the students' perspective, digital communication significantly influences institutional image. One student stated: “The university looks active and credible because it consistently shares updates about achievements and activities.” (I5/I11).

Digital communication directly shapes stakeholder perception. High-frequency updates and visually engaging content enhance institutional attractiveness. Overall, the findings demonstrate that integrated communication strategies play a critical role in building institutional image and reputation. The synergy among communication channels, message consistency, and active stakeholder engagement contributes to the development of a positive institutional perception.

Contribution of Strategic Public Relations to Competitive Advantage

The third finding indicates that strategic public relations significantly contributes to enhancing competitive advantage in higher education. This contribution is reflected in three main aspects: increased public trust, improved institutional visibility, and strengthened differentiation among competing institutions.

Based on interviews with institutional leaders at Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, strategic public relations plays a crucial role in building public trust. One informant stated: "Public trust is not only built from academic quality, but also from how we communicate and demonstrate that quality to the public." (I1). This statement highlights the importance of communication in shaping trust. Strategic public relations functions as a mechanism that transforms internal institutional quality into external trust. The institution actively publishes academic achievements and strategic activities as a form of transparency to the public.

In addition, institutional visibility is significantly enhanced through effective communication management. Based on interviews with public relations staff, the informant stated: "Through active communication on social media and mass media, the university becomes more visible and recognized by the public." (I3).

Visibility is a direct outcome of consistent and intensive communication efforts. Digital communication platforms show a high frequency of content updates, including achievements, academic events, and promotional materials. Based on the findings, the contribution of strategic public relations to competitive advantage in higher education can be illustrated as follows:

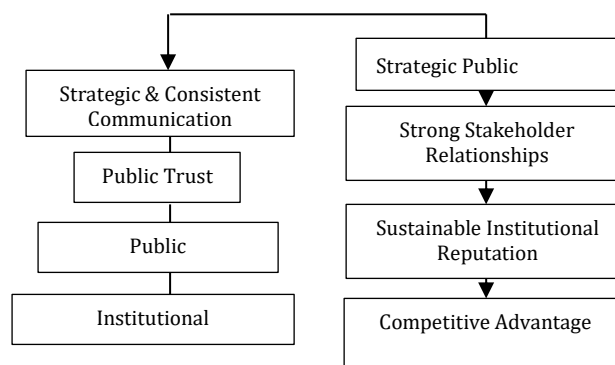


Figure 3. Model of Strategic Public Relations Contribution to Competitive Advantage

Figure 3 illustrates that strategic public relations contributes to competitive advantage through strategic and consistent communication, which generates public trust, institutional visibility, and differentiation. These elements strengthen stakeholder relationships and lead to the development of a sustainable institutional reputation, ultimately enhancing competitive advantage. Furthermore, institutional differentiation emerges as a key factor in achieving competitive advantage. Based on interviews with

leaders at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, the informant stated: "We must have a distinctive identity to compete with other universities." (I7).

Differentiation is essential for establishing a unique competitive position. Observation: The institution emphasizes innovation and community engagement as its distinctive characteristics. In addition, stakeholder relationships play a significant role in strengthening competitive advantage. Interviews with alumni and stakeholders revealed that strong institutional relationships enhance trust and support. One informant stated: "Strong relationships between the university and the community make us more trusting and supportive of the institution." (I6/I12).

Strong stakeholder engagement increases institutional loyalty and long-term support. Collaborative programs and community-based activities are prominently communicated as part of institutional strategies. From the student perspective, institutional attractiveness is also influenced by communication strategies. One informant stated: "I chose this university because it appears active and frequently showcases achievements." (I5/I11).

Effective communication directly influences student decision-making, contributing to competitive advantage. Promotional content frequently highlights student achievements and program excellence. Overall, the findings demonstrate that competitive advantage in higher education is not solely determined by academic quality but also by the institution's ability to strategically communicate its strengths. Strategic public relations serves as a bridge between internal institutional quality and external public perception, transforming communication efforts into sustainable competitive value.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that strategic public relations serves as a fundamental foundation in shaping institutional positioning through a systematic and structured process involving public needs analysis, institutional identity strengthening, and integrated communication strategies (Pudjono et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the perspective of James E. Grunig, which conceptualizes public relations as a strategic management function rather than merely a technical communication activity (Fan et al., 2025; Hoeper et al., 2025). In this regard, institutional positioning is not formed naturally but is deliberately constructed through communication processes that align institutional strengths with stakeholder expectations. This indicates that public relations operates not only as a communication tool but also as a strategic mechanism that shapes how institutions are perceived within competitive environments.

Furthermore, the study highlights that the identification of public needs reflects a stakeholder-oriented communication approach, where understanding audience expectations becomes the basis for designing effective communication strategies. This finding is consistent with prior research emphasizing that organizational communication must be adaptive to dynamic external environments (O'Callaghan et al., 2025; Q. Wang et al., 2025). Institutional identity strengthening also emerges as a critical component in positioning, as a clear and consistent identity enables institutions to establish strong differentiation in competitive contexts (Kethüda, 2023). Therefore, strategic public relations functions as an adaptive system that continuously aligns internal institutional identity with external perceptions to maintain relevance and consistency.

In addition, integrated communication plays a significant role in strengthening institutional positioning by ensuring alignment across multiple communication channels (Jimada-Ojuolape et al., 2025; Pan et al., 2025). The findings indicate that message consistency enhances clarity and reinforces institutional identity in the minds of stakeholders. This suggests that strategic public relations extends beyond information dissemination to the strategic management of meaning and perception. Consequently, institutional positioning is constructed through a sequential and interconnected process, where public needs analysis, identity strengthening, and integrated communication collectively shape public perception and institutional legitimacy.

The findings further reveal that integrated communication strategies play a crucial role in building institutional image and reputation through the integration of media relations, digital branding, academic publications, and stakeholder engagement (Lim & Zhang, 2025; Shalihati et al., 2025). This is consistent with studies suggesting that integrated communication enhances message consistency and strengthens organizational image (Kargbo et al., 2025; Odoom et al., 2025). Moreover, the increasing use of digital media reflects a transformation in public relations practices, where social media serves as a strategic tool for stakeholder engagement and institutional visibility (Geysi, 2025; Uysal & Deng, 2025). These findings indicate that reputation is not only influenced by communication intensity but also by the consistency and coherence of messages delivered across platforms.

Beyond communication practices, the study emphasizes that institutional reputation is also shaped by substantive performance, particularly through academic publications and institutional activities. This suggests that reputation is both communicative and performance-based, requiring alignment between what institutions do and how they communicate it. Message consistency emerges as a key factor in fostering trust, as stakeholders are more likely to trust institutions that deliver stable and coherent messages (Bello et al., 2025). In addition, stakeholder engagement strengthens institutional reputation by building relational trust and long-term connections, indicating that reputation is not only communicative but also relational in nature.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that strategic public relations significantly contributes to competitive advantage through increased public trust, institutional visibility, and differentiation. From the Resource-Based View perspective, strategic public relations can be understood as a valuable organizational capability that creates competitive value (Dwitasari et al., 2025b; Kim & Uysal, 2025). This is further supported by Porter's theory, which emphasizes differentiation as a key driver of competitive advantage (Probojakti et al., 2025; Van Hoang et al., 2025). Public trust enables long-term stakeholder support (Farmanesh et al., 2025; Zhou, 2025), while institutional visibility enhances competitiveness by attracting stakeholders (ALShanti et al., 2025; Indriyani et al., 2025). Thus, strategic public relations functions as a bridge linking internal institutional quality with external public perception, transforming communication into a strategic asset that generates sustainable competitive advantage.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that strategic public relations constitutes a critical and multidimensional capability in enhancing institutional positioning and competitive advantage in higher education. The most important insight derived from this research is that public relations is not merely a communication function but a strategic mechanism

that systematically transforms internal institutional strengths into externally perceived value. Through public needs analysis, institutional identity strengthening, and integrated communication strategies, institutions are able to construct clear positioning, build consistent image and reputation, and strengthen differentiation in competitive environments. The findings also emphasize that communication effectiveness lies not only in message dissemination but in the alignment between institutional performance and how it is communicated to stakeholders. In this regard, strategic public relations serves as a bridge that connects internal quality with external perception, ultimately generating public trust, visibility, and sustainable competitive advantage.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the development of knowledge by integrating strategic public relations, institutional positioning, reputation, and competitive advantage into a unified and comprehensive framework. This integrative approach strengthens the theoretical understanding of public relations as a dynamic capability within organizational strategy. However, this study is not without limitations. The use of a qualitative multi-case design with a limited number of research sites may restrict the generalizability of the findings, and the context-specific nature of the cases may not fully represent broader institutional variations. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ mixed-method approaches or larger-scale comparative studies across different regions and types of institutions. Further studies may also explore the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and digital analytics, in enhancing the effectiveness of strategic public relations in higher education.

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