

Institutional Branding and Media Visibility in Higher Education: A Theoretical Model for Strategic Communication Management

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual study aims to explain how higher education institutions (HEIs) can strengthen institutional branding through strategic communication. It develops a theoretical model linking strategic communication capability (SCC) to institutional brand equity via the mediating mechanisms of media engagement, institutional visibility, and perceived legitimacy. The paper employs a conceptual research design grounded in an integrative literature review of Scopus-indexed studies published between 2010 and 2025. Drawing on Institutional Theory, Strategic Communication Theory, and Branding Theory, it synthesizes key insights through thematic integration and theoretical reasoning to construct a comprehensive conceptual framework supported by five propositions. The findings position strategic communication as a dynamic managerial capability that transforms internal competencies into external legitimacy and reputation, with media engagement and visibility identified as key mechanisms driving brand equity. The study provides practical guidance for higher education leaders and policymakers on professionalizing communication functions, enhancing transparency, and leveraging media strategies to strengthen institutional reputation. The research is limited by its conceptual nature and absence of empirical testing; future studies are encouraged to validate the model across different cultural and institutional contexts using mixed methods and longitudinal designs. The study's social implications lie in its potential to enhance public trust, accountability, and transparency in higher education by fostering open, evidence-based communication practices. Overall, the paper contributes to higher education management literature by integrating communication, legitimacy, and branding theories into a unified model that advances understanding of institutional reputation-building in the digital era.

Keywords: Strategic communication capability, Institutional branding, Media visibility, Organizational legitimacy, Higher education management, Brand equity.

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, universities face intensifying pressure to operate not only as centers of knowledge creation but also as brands competing for visibility, trust, and legitimacy (O'Sullivan, Polkinghorne, Chapleo, & Cownie, 2024). Globalization, digitalization, and marketization have reshaped the higher-education landscape, requiring institutions to differentiate themselves within a crowded and media-saturated environment (Sun, 2023). Consequently, media communication—ranging from traditional news outlets to digital and social media platforms—has emerged as a decisive factor in shaping the reputation and legitimacy of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Yaping, 2023; Le, 2023). Within this evolving context, institutional branding has moved

beyond visual design and promotional messaging; it now represents a strategic managerial capability that aligns communication, reputation, and performance (Girardin, 2024; Miotto, 2020).

Despite this increasing recognition, many universities still exhibit fragmented, reactive, or inconsistent communication practices that fail to leverage media as a strategic asset (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015). Press releases and sporadic online campaigns often occur in isolation, detached from long-term institutional goals or coherent identity narratives (Sataøen, 2024). In the absence of coordinated strategy, such efforts can dilute brand meaning and hinder trust-building with key stakeholders, including students, faculty, funders, and policymakers. While existing literature on higher-education branding emphasizes the importance of identity, positioning, and stakeholder engagement (O'Sullivan et al., 2024; Sun, 2023), less attention has been paid to the organizational capability required to systematically manage communication, especially the role of strategic communication in achieving sustained media visibility.

From the perspective of Institutional Theory, universities derive legitimacy by conforming to social norms, expectations, and values that define appropriate organizational behavior (Scott, 2008). Legitimacy, therefore, is not only achieved through academic excellence or accreditation, but also through symbolic recognition in the public sphere. Media visibility plays a crucial legitimating role by signaling that an institution aligns with societal values and contributes to public good (Miotto, 2020). Positive media coverage can thus enhance stakeholder trust and reinforce an institution's identity as credible, responsible, and high-quality. Conversely, limited or negative visibility may erode legitimacy and brand equity. Therefore, strategic media engagement becomes a key mechanism through which universities negotiate legitimacy and maintain public confidence (Suchman, 1995).

Recent scholarship reinforces this link between communication, visibility, and legitimacy. For instance, Girardin (2024) emphasized that brand authenticity—how accurately institutional identity is reflected in external communication—significantly influences stakeholder trust and perceived credibility. Similarly, O'Sullivan et al. (2024) observed that consistent, transparent communication can transform universities into trusted voices within their communities. Yet, the majority of empirical studies remain fragmented: some focus narrowly on marketing outputs, while others assess social-media engagement or student perceptions (Le et al., 2023; Hoang, Phan, & Le, 2023). Collectively, these studies offer valuable insights but fail to integrate internal communication capabilities with external media dynamics into a cohesive theoretical model.

This fragmentation limits both scholarly understanding and managerial guidance. The absence of an integrated conceptual framework constrains efforts to explain how internal communication resources translate into external brand performance. Bibliometric analyses confirm this gap: Le et al. (2023) reviewed over 400 articles on HEI branding and found few studies connecting communication strategy with legitimacy or reputation outcomes. Addressing this gap is vital, as universities increasingly operate within what Petersen et al. (2025) call the “attention economy,” where visibility and narrative control directly influence institutional success.

Accordingly, this paper develops a conceptual model linking strategic communication capability, media engagement intensity, institutional visibility, perceived legitimacy, and institutional brand equity. It posits that HEIs with robust communication capability are better positioned to engage media strategically, achieve sustained visibility, and translate that visibility into legitimacy and brand strength. This framework synthesizes insights from institutional theory (Scott, 2008), strategic communication theory (Allen, 2016), and branding literature (Yaping, 2023; O'Sullivan et al., 2024), thereby offering a multidimensional explanation of how communication processes create reputational capital in higher education.

The theoretical and practical contributions of this model are threefold. First, it bridges the disconnect between communication and branding research by explaining the internal-to-external mechanisms of legitimacy creation. Second, it enriches institutional theory by positioning media visibility as a central—not peripheral—determinant of organizational legitimacy in higher education. Third, it provides actionable insights for university managers, suggesting how communication offices can integrate media analytics, storytelling, and leadership communication to enhance long-term brand equity.

The guiding research questions are as follows:

- How does strategic communication capability influence the intensity and quality of media engagement in higher education institutions?
- In what ways does media engagement translate into institutional visibility?
- How does institutional visibility contribute to perceived legitimacy, and how does legitimacy mediate the effect on institutional brand equity?

In summary, the strategic communication–media–legitimacy nexus has become a vital domain for contemporary higher education management. Rather than viewing media simply as a channel for promotional content, this study conceptualizes it as a symbolic arena where legitimacy and reputation are continuously produced, challenged, and reinforced. The proposed model invites both scholars and practitioners to reconceptualize media engagement as a deliberate, evidence-based, and institution-wide capability. The remainder

of the paper presents the theoretical background, conceptual framework, implications, and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The development of a theoretical model linking strategic communication, media visibility, legitimacy, and institutional branding requires grounding in three complementary perspectives: (1) Institutional Theory, which explains the pursuit of legitimacy as a central organizational goal; (2) Strategic Communication Theory, which conceptualizes communication as an intentional managerial capability; and (3) Branding Theory in Higher Education, which frames institutional identity and stakeholder perception as sources of brand equity. Together, these perspectives illuminate how internal communicative capacity enables universities to project legitimacy and credibility in a competitive, media-driven environment.

Institutional Theory and Organizational Legitimacy

Institutional Theory posits that organizations do not operate in isolation; rather, they exist within social environments composed of norms, rules, and expectations that dictate acceptable behavior (Scott, 2008). To secure resources and longevity, organizations must appear legitimate—that is, their actions must be perceived as appropriate and congruent with societal values (Suchman, 1995). Recent studies emphasize that legitimacy also emerges through informational and communicative mechanisms that convey transparency and responsiveness (Fu, Liu, & Qiu, 2024). Legitimacy thus becomes a symbolic resource: it cannot be directly manufactured but must be cultivated and maintained through consistent signals of alignment with social norms (Miotto, 2020).

In the context of higher education, legitimacy has historically been rooted in academic excellence, research productivity, and service to society. However, the contemporary information environment has redefined how legitimacy is conferred and perceived. Media visibility—particularly through news coverage, social media mentions, and digital storytelling—has become a key symbolic mechanism through which legitimacy is enacted (Petersen, Cappellari, & Rovira, 2025). When universities appear frequently and positively in credible media, they signal transparency, innovation, and alignment with societal priorities such as sustainability, inclusion, or digital transformation. Conversely, institutions absent from media discourse may struggle to be recognized as legitimate actors, regardless of their intrinsic quality.

Scholars argue that HEIs increasingly function within what has been described as a “reputation economy” or “attention economy,” where social visibility and media narratives shape institutional standing as much as accreditation or performance indicators (Miotto, 2020; Petersen et al., 2025). Thus, legitimacy becomes contingent not only on conformity to professional norms but also on an institution’s ability to communicate its value effectively and consistently. This dynamic situates media visibility as a mediating construct—bridging internal quality with external recognition—thereby forming the first conceptual pillar of the proposed framework.

Strategic Communication as a Managerial Capability

Strategic Communication Theory views communication not as a reactive dissemination activity, but as a core managerial process that deliberately aligns messages, stakeholders, and institutional objectives (Allen, 2016). According to this perspective, communication contributes directly to organizational effectiveness by shaping perception, fostering trust, and coordinating action. It involves the systematic management of information flows across internal and external environments through planned, data-informed, and audience-sensitive engagement.

In higher education, strategic communication encompasses a broad set of practices, including public relations, social media management, leadership messaging, crisis response, and stakeholder dialogue (Sataøen, 2024). Strategic communication also plays a crucial role in how institutions interpret and respond to public concerns, especially under digital scrutiny (Müller, 2021). Legitimacy construction increasingly relies on dialogic, participatory forms of communication that demonstrate responsiveness (Ågren, 2022). Effective universities approach these practices holistically, coordinating them through clear governance structures, message consistency, and cross-unit collaboration (O’Sullivan et al., 2024). This capability-based view suggests that communication effectiveness depends on institutional competencies—resources such as skilled personnel, technological infrastructure, analytics tools, and strategic planning capacity.

Empirical studies show that universities with strong communication systems tend to achieve higher reputational outcomes, better media engagement, and stronger stakeholder relationships (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015; O’Sullivan et al., 2024). For instance, Sataøen (2024) found that communication professionals increasingly act as strategic advisors rather than technical staff, signaling a paradigm shift from reactive publicity to proactive reputation management. In conceptual terms, Strategic Communication Capability (SCC) represents a dynamic managerial capability that enables HEIs to navigate complex media ecosystems and convert communicative resources into reputational assets. Within the proposed model, SCC is theorized as the antecedent construct that drives media engagement and subsequent visibility.

Media Visibility as an Intervening Mechanism

Media visibility refers to the frequency, salience, and framing of an institution's appearance across traditional and digital media channels (Petersen et al., 2025). It is both an output of communication activity and an input to reputation formation. Visibility not only increases the likelihood that stakeholders will recognize and recall an institution but also affects how they interpret its credibility and relevance. The tone and context of media coverage often act as cues for evaluating institutional legitimacy (Miotto, 2020).

In the higher education domain, media visibility has become synonymous with institutional voice. For example, universities that actively engage journalists, share research outcomes, and maintain transparent digital communication tend to be perceived as more innovative and trustworthy (O'Sullivan et al., 2024; Girardin, 2024). Conversely, institutions with limited or inconsistent visibility risk being overshadowed by peers with stronger narrative control. The ability to sustain positive visibility thus becomes a competitive advantage—an intangible asset derived from communicative excellence.

Within the proposed conceptual model, media visibility mediates the relationship between strategic communication capability and perceived legitimacy. It transforms internal communicative intent into external acknowledgment, amplifying institutional narratives through public exposure.

Institutional Branding and Brand Equity in Higher Education

Branding in higher education has evolved beyond marketing toward a strategic process of identity construction (Sun, 2023; Yaping, 2023). Universities must articulate authentic narratives that integrate academic mission with societal relevance (Girardin, 2024). Recent literature conceptualizes HEI branding through the BIMIR model — Brand Identity, Meaning, Image, and Reputation — which collectively represent symbolic capital (Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, & Nguyen, 2016). Systematic reviews indicate a diversification of branding research, covering stakeholder co-creation, digital transformation, and authenticity management (Yaping, 2023; Le, Hoang, & Phan, 2023). Empirical studies link brand equity to student experiences and perceived value (Sá & Nguyen, 2022), while case analyses from China demonstrate how emerging universities build recognition through deliberate communication strategies (University brand building and recognition, 2024). At the institutional level, branding initiatives must address stakeholder alignment and contextual challenges (Branding Initiatives in Higher Educational Institutions, 2019) and embed sustainability practices into brand positioning (Influence of sustainability in the positioning of the university brand, 2024). Internal visual identity coherence further reinforces authenticity (Internal Perspectives on Visual Identities in Higher Education, 2024). This study extends prior conceptual frameworks (University Branding: A Conceptualizing Model, 2017) by integrating branding within a legitimacy-driven communication framework, linking SCC, visibility, and trust to institutional brand equity.

Integrating the Theoretical Perspectives

The synthesis of these theories leads to a holistic understanding of how communication and legitimacy interact in the higher-education context. Institutional Theory explains why legitimacy is crucial; Strategic Communication Theory explains how communication capability enables institutions to pursue legitimacy through media; and Branding Theory explains the long-term reputational outcomes of this process. Together, they establish a logical flow:

- Strategic Communication Capability → enables effective Media Engagement
- Media Engagement → drives Institutional Visibility
- Visibility → enhances Perceived Legitimacy
- Legitimacy → strengthens Institutional Brand Equity

This integrated framework provides a theoretical foundation for the conceptual model developed in the next section, illustrating the sequential and mediated relationships that underpin strategic brand building in HEIs.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **conceptual research design** based on an **integrative literature review** approach. Instead of collecting primary empirical data, the methodology focuses on synthesizing and consolidating insights from prior studies to construct a theoretically coherent model. The process draws upon three complementary theoretical foundations—**Institutional Theory**, **Strategic Communication Theory**, and **Branding Theory**—to explain how strategic communication capability (SCC) contributes to institutional branding through the mediating mechanisms of media engagement, visibility, and perceived legitimacy. The literature selection targeted peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, emphasizing works published between 2010 and 2025 in the domains of higher-education management, communication, and organizational legitimacy. The review

followed an iterative process of identifying, comparing, and synthesizing recurring constructs and causal patterns. Through **thematic integration**, relevant constructs were merged and contrasted to identify conceptual linkages and theoretical gaps. The final stage involved model development, in which the relationships among SCC, media engagement, visibility, legitimacy, and brand equity were theorized and articulated as testable propositions.

This conceptual methodology aligns with established approaches for theory development in management research, emphasizing logical reasoning, theoretical coherence, and contribution to future empirical inquiry (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011).

Proposed Conceptual Model and Propositions

Building on the preceding theoretical discussion, this section integrates insights from Institutional Theory, Strategic Communication Theory, and Branding Theory to explain how communication capability and media engagement interact to enhance institutional legitimacy and brand equity in higher education. The model (illustrated in Figure 1 below) conceptualizes a sequential process:

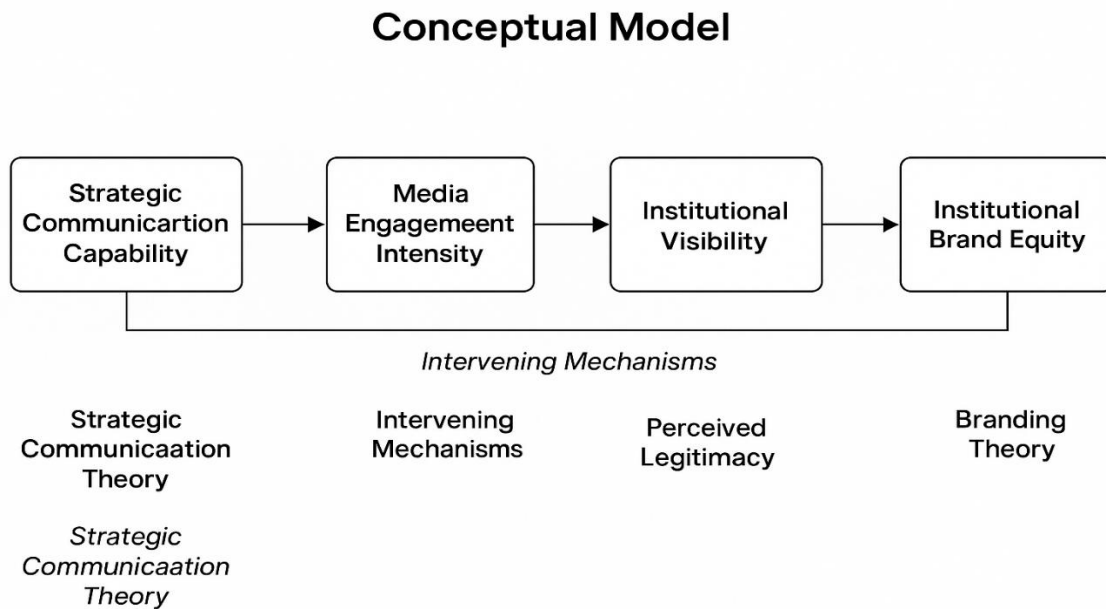


Figure 1

This aligns with recent findings that communicative information flows represent key legitimacy pathways (Fu et al., 2024). Additionally, an indirect relationship is proposed between Strategic Communication Capability and Institutional Brand Equity, emphasizing the cumulative and mediated effects of communication on reputation.

Strategic Communication Capability and Media Engagement Intensity

Strategic Communication Capability (SCC) refers to an institution's ability to design, coordinate, and evaluate communication activities that align with organizational strategy (Allen, 2016). It encompasses managerial foresight, internal coordination, communication expertise, and technological tools (Sataøen, 2024). In universities, SCC manifests in the ability to develop clear messaging, maintain media relations, and strategically plan outreach across digital and traditional channels (O'Sullivan et al., 2024).

According to the capability-based view, communication constitutes an organizational resource that can be developed and leveraged for competitive advantage (Teece, 2007). HEIs with stronger SCC are better positioned to establish enduring media relationships, craft evidence-based narratives, and manage crises effectively (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015). As a result, they engage more intensively and effectively with media, gaining greater control over their public image and visibility.

Proposition 1 (P1):

Strategic communication capability positively influences media engagement intensity in higher education institutions.

Media Engagement Intensity and Institutional Visibility

Media Engagement Intensity (MEI) refers to the frequency, scope, and quality of an institution's interaction with media platforms, including traditional press, online journalism, and social media ecosystems (Petersen et al., 2025). The communication visibility model posits that greater engagement amplifies message diffusion and audience reach, thereby enhancing organizational visibility (Leonardi, 2014).

In higher education, sustained engagement through press releases, expert commentary, storytelling, and digital campaigns enables universities to appear prominently in media narratives. This visibility, in turn, shapes stakeholder awareness and perception (O'Sullivan et al., 2024; Girardin, 2024). Furthermore, strategic engagement allows institutions to frame their identity proactively rather than reactively, mitigating reputational risks and reinforcing credibility.

Proposition 2 (P2):

Media engagement intensity positively influences institutional visibility in higher education institutions.

Institutional Visibility and Perceived Legitimacy

Institutional Visibility (IV) represents the extent to which an organization is recognized and acknowledged by external stakeholders through public exposure (Petersen et al., 2025). Visibility is not merely quantitative; it carries symbolic meaning. In the lens of Institutional Theory, visibility acts as a signal of conformity, quality, and relevance (Scott, 2008; Suchman, 1995). Frequent and favorable coverage reinforces perceptions that a university's values align with societal expectations, thereby enhancing legitimacy (Miotto, 2020).

Visibility also enables sensemaking—stakeholders interpret what they see through the media to evaluate institutional trustworthiness. HEIs that maintain consistent public visibility across credible outlets are more likely to be perceived as legitimate, transparent, and socially engaged (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015).

Proposition 3 (P3):

Institutional visibility positively influences perceived legitimacy in higher education institutions.

Perceived Legitimacy and Institutional Brand Equity

Perceived Legitimacy (PL) denotes stakeholders' recognition that an institution operates appropriately within its societal and normative context (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy generates intangible benefits, such as reputation, trust, and stakeholder support—all of which contribute to brand equity (Miotto, 2020; Girardin, 2024).

loyalty, attract students and faculty, and secure funding and partnerships (Sun, 2023). It represents accumulated symbolic capital rooted in credibility and authenticity. When legitimacy is high, stakeholders attribute positive values to the institution's identity, thus reinforcing brand equity (O'Sullivan et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence from sustainability-oriented branding further supports the connection between legitimacy and social value (Influence of sustainability, 2024). Thus, communication excellence translates into durable reputation and stakeholder trust.

Proposition 4 (P4):

Perceived legitimacy positively influences institutional brand equity in higher education institutions.

Indirect Relationship: Strategic Communication Capability and Institutional Brand Equity

While SCC may not directly generate brand equity, it exerts indirect influence through the chain of media engagement, visibility, and legitimacy. Institutions with advanced communication systems create cohesive narratives and manage consistent public exposure, fostering legitimacy and, consequently, stronger brand equity.

This multi-layered relationship aligns with the resource orchestration perspective, suggesting that organizational capabilities yield outcomes through orchestrated processes (Teece, 2007). Thus, SCC represents the strategic foundation that enables long-term brand success via communication-driven pathways.

Proposition 5 (P5):

Strategic communication capability indirectly influences institutional brand equity through media engagement intensity, institutional visibility, and perceived legitimacy.

Conceptual Model Summary

The proposed framework (Figure 1) integrates the above propositions into a cohesive model depicting the sequential and mediated relationships among constructs.

- Antecedent: Strategic Communication Capability
- Mediators: Media Engagement Intensity, Institutional Visibility, Perceived Legitimacy

- Outcome: Institutional Brand Equity

This configuration illustrates a dynamic system in which communication serves as both cause and conduit, transforming managerial capabilities into reputational outcomes. The model contributes theoretically by linking institutional communication processes with branding outcomes, and practically by providing a roadmap for HEI leaders to design communication strategies that enhance legitimacy and reputation.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The conceptual model proposed in this study situates strategic communication capability as the cornerstone of institutional branding in higher education, operating through a chain of mediating constructs—media engagement intensity, institutional visibility, and perceived legitimacy. This section discusses how the model contributes to existing theories and offers practical implications for university leaders, policymakers, and communication professionals.

Theoretical Contributions

Integrating Institutional and Communication Perspectives

The model extends Institutional Theory by introducing strategic communication as a central mechanism through which legitimacy is achieved and maintained. While classical institutional perspectives emphasize structural conformity and normative alignment (Scott, 2008; Suchman, 1995), this framework positions communication as the active process that translates conformity into public recognition. In doing so, it bridges a critical gap between institutional conformity and symbolic visibility.

By linking communication capability to legitimacy through media visibility, the model advances a dynamic interpretation of institutional legitimacy, suggesting that legitimacy is not static but continuously negotiated in the media space (Miotto, 2020; Petersen et al., 2025). This contribution underscores that in today's "attention economy," institutions gain legitimacy not only by meeting standards but by demonstrating those standards through visible, credible communication.

Expanding Strategic Communication Theory

From the perspective of Strategic Communication Theory, the model reconceptualizes communication as a capability-based resource (Allen, 2016; Teece, 2007). Previous literature often treated communication as a tactical or functional activity, whereas this paper highlights it as a strategic organizational competency that can yield sustainable reputational advantages.

This aligns with the capability-based view, where unique internal capabilities—such as professionalized communication teams, leadership alignment, and data-driven media management—constitute sources of institutional differentiation (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015). The model thus provides a theoretical mechanism explaining how communicative competence evolves into institutional competitiveness, especially under public scrutiny and digital visibility.

Bridging Branding and Legitimacy Research

Branding research in higher education has largely evolved within marketing and identity frameworks (Sun, 2023; Yaping, 2023). This paper enriches that literature by embedding branding processes within institutional legitimacy theory. Brand equity is reinterpreted here not as a mere consumer perception but as a reflection of legitimacy accumulation. In this sense, brand equity becomes the tangible manifestation of sustained legitimacy, trust, and authenticity (Girardin, 2024; O'Sullivan et al., 2024).

The model's theoretical contribution lies in connecting the "hard" managerial aspects of branding (e.g., visibility metrics, media planning) with the "soft" institutional dimensions of credibility, trust, and alignment with societal values. This integrated lens helps future researchers examine reputation formation as both a communicative and institutional phenomenon.

Managerial Implications

Strengthening Strategic Communication Systems

For university leaders, the model underscores that communication is a strategic asset, not a peripheral service. Institutions should therefore invest in professionalizing their communication functions—building dedicated units with expertise in media analytics, storytelling, and stakeholder engagement (Sataøen, 2024).

Leaders should develop strategic communication roadmaps that define key audiences, narrative priorities, and communication objectives aligned with institutional missions. These plans must integrate internal coordination among deanships, research centers, and administration to ensure coherent institutional messaging.

By enhancing SCC, universities can proactively manage their visibility rather than react to media events. Such preparedness enables institutions to transform public communication from a reactive task into a proactive legitimacy strategy.

Leveraging Media Analytics and AI Tools

Modern HEIs operate within data-rich environments. Thus, communication offices should adopt media-monitoring systems and AI-driven analytics to track coverage trends, sentiment, and engagement metrics. These data help quantify visibility and provide early warnings of reputational risks (Petersen et al., 2025).

Universities can utilize AI tools to evaluate communication effectiveness, identify narrative gaps, and tailor messaging to diverse stakeholder groups. Embedding analytics into decision-making transforms media management from intuition-based practice into evidence-based strategic communication.

Fostering Leadership Visibility

Effective branding depends not only on institutional communication departments but also on leadership participation. Rectors, vice rectors, and deans act as symbolic representatives whose visibility contributes directly to institutional reputation. Leadership training in public speaking, social media engagement, and media relations can amplify credibility and convey authenticity (O'Sullivan et al., 2024).

This “leadership communication” approach ensures message consistency between institutional strategy and public representation. By aligning leadership voice with institutional narratives, HEIs can humanize their brands and build relational trust with stakeholders.

Embedding Communication in Organizational Culture

The model also implies that communication effectiveness depends on internal alignment. Universities that promote transparent, dialogic communication cultures—where faculty, staff, and students participate in shaping institutional narratives—achieve stronger legitimacy. Internal communication fosters ownership and coherence, ensuring that the brand story is lived, not merely promoted (Girardin, 2024).

HEIs should therefore consider communication competence as part of staff development, embedding it into leadership evaluation, training, and governance frameworks.

Policy and Sectoral Implications

Beyond institutional management, the model offers insights for policymakers and regulatory bodies. National higher education systems increasingly rely on public legitimacy to justify funding and accreditation. Ministries and accreditation agencies can use this model to encourage universities to integrate strategic communication and transparency into quality assurance frameworks.

For example, visibility and communication quality could be included among evaluation indicators for institutional excellence or social impact. Doing so aligns with global trends emphasizing accountability and stakeholder engagement in public-sector governance (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015; Miotto, 2020).

Furthermore, the model suggests potential for cross-sector collaboration. Universities can strengthen collective legitimacy through consortia that promote shared narratives—such as sustainability, innovation, or employability—enhancing the national and regional brand of higher education.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The conceptual framework invites empirical testing through mixed methods. Quantitative studies could employ content analysis of media coverage, bibliometric analysis, or sentiment analysis to operationalize institutional visibility and legitimacy. Qualitative approaches, such as interviews with communication directors or comparative case studies, could explore how SCC develops across cultural and organizational contexts.

Future research might also examine moderating variables such as digital transformation readiness, institutional size, or governance model. Comparative studies between public and private universities, or across national systems (e.g., GCC vs. Europe), would further enrich understanding of contextual influences on communication-led branding.

Summary of Contributions

In summary, this model contributes to theory by integrating institutional legitimacy, communication capability, and branding outcomes into a unified framework. It contributes to practice by outlining actionable pathways for

enhancing visibility and trust. For policymakers, it provides a lens to evaluate the communicative performance of HEIs as a dimension of institutional excellence.

Ultimately, the study reinforces that in the knowledge economy, communication is credibility—and credibility is the foundation of sustainable brand equity.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present study developed a conceptual framework to explain how strategic communication capability (SCC) drives institutional branding in higher education through the sequential mechanisms of media engagement, visibility, and legitimacy. In today's complex educational environment, where universities operate within an increasingly globalized and media-saturated ecosystem, institutional reputation depends not only on academic excellence but also on how effectively it is communicated and symbolically represented in the public domain. The proposed model integrates Institutional Theory, Strategic Communication Theory, and Branding Theory, thereby offering a multidimensional explanation of how communicative competencies translate into brand equity.

Summary of Key Insights

The model positions SCC as a foundational resource enabling universities to engage the media proactively, manage visibility strategically, and cultivate legitimacy. This dynamic chain—communication capability → media engagement → visibility → legitimacy → brand equity—demonstrates that legitimacy is both a communicative and perceptual phenomenon. Media visibility operates as the mediating bridge, converting internal institutional practices into public recognition and trust (Miotto, 2020; Petersen et al., 2025).

By conceptualizing legitimacy as a product of sustained visibility rather than static conformity, this framework redefines how HEIs can compete in an era where attention equals authority. The model contributes to academic discourse by linking three distinct research streams: (1) institutional legitimacy and reputation management; (2) strategic communication capability and organizational performance; and (3) brand equity and stakeholder trust in higher education (O'Sullivan et al., 2024; Sun, 2023; Yaping, 2023).

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study advances the understanding of legitimacy as a communicative construct—one that must be continuously negotiated through media interaction. Traditional institutional theory emphasizes structural compliance; however, this paper shows that legitimacy also depends on symbolic exposure in mediated environments. Furthermore, by grounding strategic communication in the capability-based view (Teece, 2007), the model demonstrates how intangible assets such as communication planning, leadership engagement, and media analytics contribute to sustainable reputational advantages.

It also extends branding theory by embedding it within institutional logics. Rather than treating branding as a marketing activity, this model frames it as a strategic governance function essential for institutional resilience, stakeholder engagement, and long-term positioning.

Managerial Implications

For university administrators and communication professionals, this framework emphasizes the need to view communication as a strategic core capability. Leaders should:

- Invest in professional communication infrastructure — including skilled staff, digital media tools, and analytics systems.
- Foster leadership communication visibility — training rectors, deans, and senior managers to act as public ambassadors of institutional values.
- Institutionalize communication planning — ensuring that messaging aligns with institutional mission and social impact goals.
- Promote an internal culture of storytelling — empowering faculty and students to contribute authentic narratives that reinforce brand authenticity (Girardin, 2024).

In doing so, universities can enhance stakeholder trust and public legitimacy, translating intangible communication resources into measurable brand equity.

Policy and Sector-Level Implications

At the system level, policymakers and quality-assurance bodies can adopt this model as a framework for evaluating institutional transparency and engagement. National higher education frameworks—particularly in regions such as the GCC—may consider including media visibility and stakeholder communication as indicators of institutional excellence. Encouraging HEIs to communicate social impact, sustainability initiatives, and

innovation outcomes can elevate the collective legitimacy of the national education system (Sataoën & Wæraas, 2015).

Moreover, collaborative initiatives among universities—such as consortia for sustainability branding or cross-institutional digital storytelling—can strengthen regional reputation, aligning with global trends toward networked legitimacy and shared identity in higher education.

Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual study, this paper provides fertile ground for future empirical investigation. Several promising research avenues emerge:

Operationalization of Constructs:

Future studies should develop validated measurement scales for strategic communication capability, media engagement intensity, institutional visibility, and perceived legitimacy. Mixed-method designs can integrate content analysis, sentiment analysis, and stakeholder surveys to empirically test the proposed pathways.

Cross-Cultural and Comparative Studies:

Given cultural and regulatory differences, comparative studies between public and private HEIs, or across national contexts (e.g., GCC vs. Europe or Southeast Asia), could illuminate how institutional and cultural variables moderate the communication–legitimacy relationship.

Longitudinal Analysis:

Longitudinal research could explore how legitimacy and brand equity evolve over time, especially during crises (e.g., leadership change, funding cuts, or social controversies). This would deepen understanding of the resilience dimension of SCC.

Digital Transformation and AI Integration:

Future inquiry may also examine the role of artificial intelligence and big data analytics in enhancing communication capability and brand management. Universities increasingly rely on AI tools for social media listening, reputation tracking, and personalized communication—topics that remain underexplored in academic literature.

Interdisciplinary Integration:

Scholars could extend this model by incorporating theories from media studies, organizational psychology, and public relations, providing a broader, interdisciplinary understanding of legitimacy construction in HEIs.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this conceptual paper argues that communication is the new currency of legitimacy in higher education. Universities that cultivate strategic communication capability will not only survive but thrive in an era defined by visibility, transparency, and trust. By proposing a theoretically grounded and practically relevant model, the study contributes to both academic scholarship and institutional practice, guiding HEIs toward more deliberate, evidence-based, and sustainable communication strategies.

As higher education continues to navigate the complexities of globalization, technological disruption, and social accountability, the relationship between strategic communication and institutional branding will remain central to organizational success. The proposed framework offers a foundation for future empirical validation and policy design aimed at strengthening the communicative legitimacy and global competitiveness of universities.

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