

Short Research Article

Strategic Public Relations: Illuminating Corporate Visibility of Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania through Internal Influence, Internal Collaboration, Media Engagement and Stakeholder Confidence

Abstract

In a current state where the international higher education system has put colleges and universities under pressure of acquiring resources, corporate visibility has become vital for their sustainability and survival. This study aims at exploring the role public relations strategies can play on corporate visibility, focusing on four key themes namely internal influence, internal collaboration, media engagement and stakeholder confidence. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected from 26 participants through in-depth interviews and supplemented by the review of relevant institutional documents. The findings reveal that internal influence magnified by effective communication play essential role in shaping the corporate visibility of the institution among the public. Internal collaboration, particularly with the management, employees and students emerged as key analytical strategy for extending the institution's reach and influence. Also findings reveal that media engagement was a powerful tool for amplifying the institution's achievements and initiatives, while stakeholder confidence was found to be essential in sustaining long-term corporate visibility and credibility of the institution. This study contributes to the understanding of how public relations strategies can be effectively used to illuminate the corporate visibility of Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) particularly in Tanzania. The insights gained provide practical implications for HLIs and public relations seeking to manage the complexities of reputation management in the education sector. The study further recommends future research to explore these themes in diverse institutional contexts.

Key words: *Public Relations, Corporate visibility, Higher Learning Institutions, Tanzania*

1.1. Introduction

In the current competitive educational environment, Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) are obliged to not only provide quality education but also maintain a strong presence to the public. Corporate Visibility which implies with making the institutions widely known to the public has emerged a crucial factor in the success of these institutions, influencing their ability to attract key stakeholders such as students, lecturers and funders who add value to the institutional sustainability. Also as higher education becomes increasingly globalized and market-driven, the need for HLIs to strategically manage their corporate visibility has never been more pressing (Li, Morris & Young, 2019; Mgaiwa, 2018; Park, 2017).

Public relations (PR) with its facets such as crisis communication management and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have become essential tool for institutions seeking to enhance their corporate visibility. Using communication to effectively communicate their strengths, achievements and values, HLIs can build and sustain corporate visibility; however, the strategies that underpin successful PR efforts in HLIs are complex and multifaceted. They must account for a range of factors including the influence of internal stakeholders, internal collaboration, media engagement and stakeholders' confidence.

This study therefore explores the influence of strategic public relations on the corporate visibility of HLIs, with a special focus on four key themes: internal influence, internal collaboration, media engagement and stakeholder confidence. By examining these themes, the study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which PR strategies contribute to the corporate visibility and reputation of HLIs.

The essence of internal influence in shaping HLIs' corporate visibility cannot be underestimated. The management, lecturers, administrators, technical staff and students are not only the primary contributors of institution's achievements but are also its most influential advocates. Their engagement and satisfaction are critical to the success of any PR strategy undertaken in the institutions. Similarly, when HLIs establish strong internal collaboration by working as a team and effectively communicate can significantly enhance the institution's reach and influence.

Also Media engagement is another essential component of PR strategy, serving as a mean for disseminating the institution's message to a broader audience. Effective media relations for example, can amplify an institution's successes, manage its reputation during crises and establish it as a thought leader in its field (Kriyantono, 2019). Last though not least is the stakeholders' confidence ranging from students and parents to alumni, donors and the broader community plays an important role in sustaining corporate visibility over the long term.

Using qualitative approach therefore, this study aims to explore how these themes are intertwined into the strategic efforts of higher learning institutions to illuminate their corporate visibility. The insights gained from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the value PR can add to higher education institutions. It also offers the practical guidance for institutions seeking to manage the complex environments of reputation management in a highly competitive education environment.

2.1. Corporate Visibility and Public Relations in the Higher Learning Institutions

Corporate visibility of an institution is increasingly becoming a topic of interest in corporate communication studies. The concept of corporate visibility extends beyond mere brand recognition but rather entailing the overall public's perception which determines the acceptance and recognition of institution's services and product, its quality, reputation and its impacts to the society (Li, Morris & Young, 2019).

The existing literature demonstrates that institutions worldwide are constantly endeavoring to enhance their corporate visibility for attraction and retention of stakeholders. In higher education context, corporate visibility is usually associated to institution's ability to effectively communicate its achievements such as innovations and research outputs as well as societal contributions to wider audiences. Some scholarly works suggest that Higher Learning Institutions with high corporate visibility are positioned better to compete in a crowded market, secure sources of fund and resources as well as attract top-tier talents. It also attracts media coverage that is important in raising the awareness of public about the programmes and services the HLIs offer (Li, Morris & Young, 2019; Mgaiwa, 2018; Park, 2017).

Public relations (PR) which is a field of study centered to promote and protect the image, reputation, products and/or services of the company and its policies in the eyes of the public (Ferguson, 2018; Edwards, 2018; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017), has been for ages being deployed to help organizations enhance and maintain their images and reputation. In this scenario, various HLIs plan and execute PR activities that seek to enhance their corporate visibility (Cronin, 2017) for the sake of maximizing subscriptions and retention of stakeholders including the producers, supporters and consumers of goods or services, who in turn guarantee the survival of the HLIs.

The PR field has therefore emerged as a key strategic function within higher learning institutions, playing a central role in shaping and maintaining the corporate visibility. PR strategies in higher education are designed to manage the institution's reputation, engage with stakeholders and communicate the institution's values and achievements to the public, they have remained to be a central factor in enhancing and illuminate the HLIs' corporate visibility (Miotto et al, 2020). HLIs therefore have mostly relied on various Public Relations Strategies (PRs) that underline corporate mission, vision and values. According to Allen (2016) relevant PR strategies can enhance an institution's visibility by creating a positive and consistent narrative that resonates with internal and external stakeholders. Literature also highlights that successful PR efforts are often characterized by strategic planning, proactive media engagement and the ability to respond swiftly to crises (Miotto et al, 2020; Allen 2016).

The main theory guiding the study is the Excellence Theory by Dozier (1995) and Gruning (2002). Numerous constructs from the Excellence Theory were used for the study's objectives. For example, two-way symmetrical communication was crucial for understanding how HLIs communicate with stakeholders to build positive relationships which are vital to corporate visibility. It informs the study's exploration of how strategic PR can illuminate the corporate visibility of HLIs by influencing stakeholders, initiate collaborations, engage with the media and

create stakeholder confidence. They can all provide a vigorous framework for understanding the complex environments of public relations practice in the higher learning institutions.

The second construct was based on considering PR as a management function; it examined the role of PR in decision-making processes within the HLIs. This construct explored whether the PR professionals in specific HLIs in Tanzania influenced the senior management level and whether the strategies they executed were aligned with the institutions' missions and values. The third key construct that helped in analyzing the trends of HLIs to monitor their external environment through research to understand public perceptions, media dynamics and competition in the market was environmental scanning. This was essential in increasing the predictability of existing opportunities and threats that practitioners and policymakers may have encountered during and before the execution of the PR strategies in their specific locales. The theory has some strength when considered for its application in this study. It can be highlighted for example on its focus on such issues as ethical and strategic communication. The Excellence Theory promotes ethical and transparent communication which is vital for organizations that aim to build trust and credibility among the stakeholders (Grunig, 2017).

Generally, the theory's emphasis on relationship building adds value, particularly in its focus on two-way communication. The two-way communication ideal is beneficial in the HLIs as they seek to engage with diverse stakeholders including students, potential partners, the media and the general public. Therefore, by fostering mutual understanding, HLIs in Tanzania can strengthen their reputation and corporate visibility (Grunig, 2017). Also, the theory's recommendation to integrate PR into organizational decision-making enhances its influence. Therefore, when such a recommendation is made in Tanzania HLIs, the institutions can make better-informed decisions that enhance visibility and align with broader institutional goals.

Literature about PR and corporate visibility of the HLIs show for example, tools like social media play significant role in illuminating the corporate visibility of HLIs. These scholarly works include those conducted by Faraoni et al (2024), Bituleanu and Dascalu (2021) as well as Birkholz et al (2016). The above-mentioned scholars generally position social media as strategic Public Relations component for making stakeholders interact with universities and make the particular universities more visible among the public. Such insights may be different in studies conducted by other scholars like Feyen et al (2016) and Torres-Samuel et al (2018) who maintain that the corporate visibility of HLIs is dependent on the number of publications a particular institution makes.

In Africa, studies about corporate visibility mainly cater on the various aspects of PR to achieve organizational goals and objectives. Some scholarly works for example of Anani-Bossman (2022) and Hadji (2022) add to the insight that PR cannot be highly valued and recognized to be playing significant role of illuminating corporate visibility of HLIs unless it plays the dual role of technical and managerial. Some other study findings revealed that for HLIs to create and maintain their corporate visibility must maintain their corporate identities and ensure they align with corporate mission and values. For example, Nyamwaya and Muchunku's (2021) study results show that in addition to activities like outreach programs and extracurricular activities the Kenya's Multimedia University conducted, it also strategically manage its brand to make people recall it for positive reputation gain.

In Tanzania, literature about PR and corporate visibility of the HLIs is still not detailed with rich information. However some scholars such as Masele and Rwehikiza (2022) conducted a study and found that it was essential for HLIs to use social media especially in this digital era so as to meet the competitive edge. It was however further revealed that there is still limit use of social media among the selected HLIs where the use of traditional media was predominant over social media in engaging HLIs' stakeholders and more importantly in making the particular HLIs visible. This coincides with Muniko and Akpabio's (2023) observation about the use of social media by the various organizations in Tanzania. The authors argue that PR practitioners in Tanzania have a positive attitude towards social media even though some of them are not comfortable with using it.

In general the literature about public relations and corporate visibility as well as the theoretical foundation guide the subsequent analysis of strategic public relations in illuminating the corporate visibility of higher learning institutions in Tanzania. It serves a step toward an in-depth exploration of the PR strategies, how they are employed and their influence on HLIs' Corporate visibility.

3.1. Research Methods

3.1.1. Research Population.

The population of this study included officials and students from both public and private Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania (HLIs) in Tanzania. It also involved the regulatory, advisory and supportive body to HLIs namely the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) where the researcher obtained supportive data.

3.1.2. Area of the Study

The study area constituted (2) higher learning institutions (HLIs) namely the University of Dar-es-Salaam (UDSM) and Dar-es-Salaam Tumaini University (DarTU) both located in Dar-es-Salaam. It also involved (1) Regulatory and advisory higher learning institutions namely the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) in the same city of Dar-es-Salaam (DSM). The study also constituted (1) a higher learning institution called the University of Dodoma (UDOM) located in Dodoma, (2) HLIs namely Mzumbe University (MU) and Jordan University Collage (JUCo) both located in Morogoro region were also involved in the study. It also constituted (2) HLIs namely Saint Augustine University (SAUT) and the Institute of Rural-Urban Development Planning (IRUD) both found in Mwanza.

The study also involved the Zanzibar University (ZU) located in the central district of Unguja namely Unguu. Thus, the total number of the HLIs involved in the study was (9), whereas, the four (4) regions were from the Tanzania mainland and one (1) from Zanzibar which makes a total of five (5) regions. The selection of the aforementioned HLIs was based on selection criteria as per Tanzania Higher Education Trend Admission Trends for various HLIs in the country (Refer to Table 1). Besides, the particular HLIs are in the administrative zones of the country which are also rich in the number of HLIs, both private and public-owned (TCU, 2023).

3.1.3 Features of the Higher Learning Institutions Engaged in the Study.

The HLIs engaged in the study were fundamentally grounded on various disciplines that assert the essential scrutiny of mankind. They depict what human beings are capable of doing to manage the issues happening in their day-to-day endeavours and the general World humans exist. The features of HLIs included in the study centred on the disciplines of education, social sciences, business and the mixed which imply that all disciplines were mainly involved in establishing the particular HLI. Also, one HLI involved in the study was a regulatory, advisory and supportive function for HLIs in the country by its nature.

Table 3.1: Features of the Institutions Engaged in the Study

Features	HLIs									Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	
Regulatory, advisory and supportive function feature	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Based on Mixed disciplines feature	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	5
Based on the Education discipline feature	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Based on Social Sciences disciplines feature	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Based on the Business discipline feature	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1

Source: Field Transcripts, MAXQDA Analytical Pro 2022

3.1.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size for this study was (26) respondents which comprised a mix of individuals with administrative positions, students' leadership and professionalism in public relations. Those with administrative roles included the Top Management of the higher learning institutions in which (2) of them were engaged from both public and private higher learning institutions in Tanzania. The other group of individuals was the Heads of PR Departments (HoDs) in which (6) were involved. Also, (7) public relations officers from the HLIs, (2) Tanzania Commission for Universities' officials and (9) Students Associations Presidents. The different cohort involvement in the study, therefore, signified a broad generalization and realization of the matter sought to be understood. It also ensured that the data collected was rich, meaningful and directly

related to the topic under investigation. The study involved the following techniques in selecting the sample.

A purposeful sampling technique was used to select the HLIs based on the TCU report about the trend of Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania (TCU, 2023). Categories of institutions, those that experienced fluctuations in the number of enrolled students, those that had their enrolment decreased and those that had their enrolment increased progressively were utilized as samples. Advantageously, the technique ensured an equal participation of both public and privately owned HLIs in the country. The number of selected HLIs was conveniently obtained due to the nature of the study and the projection based on the inductive thinking the researcher had before conducting the research.

The key informants were also purposely selected to participate in the study. The decision to employ purposive sampling was based on the consideration that the data for the current research would categorically originate from specific respondents with unique experience and specialized knowledge and perspective of the PR topic. Muellmann et al (2021) pinpoint that the selection criteria for key informants should be people whose social positions in the research setting give them specialist knowledge about other people, processes and happenings that is more extensive and detailed; something which the researcher of this current study did put into consideration.

The researcher considered the criteria for selecting good informants by identifying individuals who are most knowledgeable about the topic. Also, borrowing from constructivist views that recognize the perspectives of individuals with experience (Xu & Zammit, 2020), purposive sampling suited the study of this nature. The category of respondents that represented top-level management leadership, mentioning the Vice Chancellors or Provosts from both public and private HLIs, were able to provide strategic perspectives on corporate visibility and inform the researcher about issues surrounding the implementation of PR strategies.

Also, the category of respondents including the Heads of Communications/PR Departments, in their capacity as heads were able to share their perspectives about the strategies deployed to influence the corporate visibility of their specific institutions. Moreover, the Presidents of the Students' Association were selected based on a consideration that their unique perspectives would have contributed to understanding the way the PR strategies affect the student community and the overall corporate visibility of the HLIs. They were also in a position for instance, to supplement information that focuses on inquiring how the PR strategies influence the corporate visibility of the HLIs and assess how individuals endorse the HLIs in Tanzania.

Moreover, the category of TCU officials was included in the study sample considering that TCU has the mandate to recognize, register, accredit and regulate the Universities and more specifically to approve Universities' programmes and admission. In this case, the TCU officials in addition to their above-mentioned undertakings were in a position to provide a wider picture of the admission trends in the HLIs and the PR-related strategies that influence the choice of the potential prospective students. They were also in a position to explain the enrollment and graduation trends which may help account for the corporate visibility of the selected HLIs and determine the way through which PRs influence corporate visibility.

Notably, the selection of respondents for the study assured the increased diversity in terms of perspectives on the subject matters and other related issues raised during the interview. Their varied range in issues such as age and experiences at work, managerial positions and execution of the tasks of public relations, for example, for professionals in this case added a valued advantage.

Also based on empirical and theoretical evidence about interviews, theoretical technique was adopted. The number of respondents was not ultimately important to the researcher until when no new ideas were emerging in the last five interviews (Marschlich & Inghoff, 2021). The researcher rather added knowledge about the PR phenomenon in the HLIs by seeking more interviewees until the saturation point was reached; meaning that the researcher could not unveil discoveries from the respondents engaged in the study that was when the researcher stopped.

In some context, the researcher had to deploy the snowball sampling by asking key respondents in this case, for example, the Vice Chancellors and Provosts or Principals to suggest the names of potential interviewees. That could also be done specifically for top executives who most of the time are occupied with various institutional and national endeavors. They would therefore sometimes suggest people with specific traits in this case those who could be interviewed on their behalf and in instances where it might have been challenging for the researcher to identify and approach the interviewee.

3.1.5. Data Collection Methods

Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected from 26 participants through in-depth interviews. In addition to interviews, data were complemented by a review of relevant institutional documents such as corporate strategic plans, annual reports and publications such as press releases and media kits. Analysis of online media content via the institutional websites and social media content was done to assess the implementation of the strategies in terms of how stakeholders were engaged into intuitional activities and other PR efforts for enhancing and illuminate corporate visibility. The researcher considered key steps to ensure a systematic and precise selection of the documents to be reviewed. This was done while articulating the research objectives and the research guiding questions of the study. The researcher commenced the process by identifying relevant sources where the documents of interest were likely to be found. Then the researcher identified online sources, i.e. websites of the HLIs involved in the study, libraries and reputable news sources to acquire information about particular HLIs' announcements and news.

Thereafter the researcher established specific criteria for selecting documents that align with research objectives whereas the focus was mainly on their relevance to the research topic. The documents with admission trends in various HLIs in Tanzania and documents with specific information about the HLIs like their Strategic Corporate Plans, Almanac and information about HLIs' corporate events among others were identified. Purposeful sampling was useful in the process of reviewing the documents because it enabled the researcher to capture a diverse range of perspectives and acquire documents that were of topic interest as established above. The method was indeed more reliable when information about such issues as PR Strategies and

particularly their implementation was sought. The total number of documents reviewed was 14 (Appendix I). The data collected was analyzed using MAXQDA 2022 Analytical Pro, the thematic analysis software which is suitable for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The researcher adhered to ethical principles guiding the research studies such informed consent, confidentiality, data security whereas all data including interview transcripts and documents were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. The methodological approach used in this study guided the researchers to explore the PR Strategies, how they influence the corporate visibility of higher learning institutions in Tanzania, ensuring that the findings are both reliable and relevant to the study's objectives.

4.1 Results and discussion

4.1.1. Respondents' Distribution by Gender

The gender of respondents was sought to see their level of participation in the study and how each gender took part in the PR profession in terms of positions they held. It was also essential to understand gender proportion in managerial positions both at the HLIs management level and students' association clubs. It may also serve as an index for issues related to behaviour changes and working performance viz-a-vi corporate visibility. Nevertheless, the information gathered on gender may help in analyzing the similarities and differences between groups of people working in the PR field, and the proportion between male gender and female gender in the HLIs in Tanzania towards achieving organizational mission and values. The table below shows the respondents' gender distribution.

Table 4.1. Respondents' Distribution by Gender

Gender	HLI									Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	
Female	20%	25%	0%	67%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	27%
Male	80%	75%	100%	33%	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	73%

Source: Field transcripts, MAXQDA2022 Analytical Pro.

Table 4.1 shows that 73% of respondents were males whereas the remaining 27% were females. This indicates an unequal distribution of gender participation in the study. It also indicates that the majority working in the PR industry specifically in the HLIs were males. Also, those holding top managerial positions like the Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors were males. Also, the majority of males hold managerial positions such as Directors and Heads of Departments and similarly, the top leadership positions for students' associations in the HLIs were held by males. The names of respondents and organizations were concealed to protect their privacy instead the researcher presented them by referring as P1A (Respondent 1, Higher

Learning Institution A), P2A (Respondent 2, Higher Learning Institution A), P1B (Respondent 1, Higher Learning Institution B), P2B (Respondent 2, Higher Learning Institution) and so forth.

4.2 Distribution by Age

It was also necessary to acquire the respondents' distribution by age as it expands understanding of the target audience. It also helps in analyzing similarities and differences between age groups on answers provided during the interviews. Therefore, the distribution of age in the study about the influence of Public Relations on the corporate visibility of HLIs in Tanzania is presented in table 4.2

Table 4.2. Respondents' Distribution by Age Category

Age Group	HLI									Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	
40 and above	40%	25%	67%	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%	50%	35%
36 to 40	40%	0%	0%	0%	33%	50%	0%	50%	0%	18%
31 to 35	0%	25%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50%	0%	50%	12%
26 to 30	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
21 to 25	20%	50%	33%	33%	33%	50%	50%	50%	0%	35%

Source: Field transcripts, MAXQDA 2022 Analytical Pro.

Table 4.2 shows that 35% of respondents were aged "40 and above" Similarly another 35% were under the age category of "21 to 25", 18% were aged "36 to 40" and the remaining 12% were between the ages of "31 to 35". Those who fall under the age category of "40 and above" held senior managerial positions in the HLIs such as the Heads of Departments, Directors and top management positions like the Vice-Chancellor or Deputy Vice-Chancellor. 35% that comprised the age category of "21 to 25" held leadership positions in students' associations of the Higher Learning Institutions. 19% who fall under the age category of "36 to 40" head the Public Relations Departments in the Higher Learning Institutions and the remaining 12% (age between 31 and 35) held the positions of Public Relations Officers and TCU Officers in the Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania.

4.3 Respondents' Distribution by Work Experience

The research questions were also centered on understanding respondents' experience by asking them about the period they have been in their current working positions. The given differences in work experience added insight and understanding about how different situations were handled as far as Public Relations is concerned in the HLIs. It can also be relevant to learn from the successes and failures of those who have been in the industry for a specific period.

Table 4.3: Respondents' Distribution by Work Experience

Years	HLI									Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	
16 to 20	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%
11 to 15	20%	0%	0%	33%	33%	50%	0%	50%	0%	19%
6 to 10	0%	0%	0%	0%	33%	0%	0%	0%	50%	8%
1 to 5	60%	100%	100%	68%	33%	50%	100%	50%	50%	69%

Source: Field transcripts, MAXQDA 2022 Crosstab, 2023.

Table 4.3 indicates that the majority of respondents (69%) held working positions in management between “1 to 5” years. Most respondents found in this category were students' representatives in the HLIs. They held the positions of Presidents for students' associations where they had to abide by their constitution that required them not to hold the presidential positions for more than a year. However, some had experience in student leadership for a varied period, for example from two to three years. The second category of respondents had experience of “11 to 15” years which is 19%. These held managerial positions in the Public Relations industry including the Heads of Departments and Senior Public Relations Officers in the HLIs. The findings also show that 8% of respondents had experience “of 6 to 10” years in the Public Relations profession and the remaining 4% had experience of “16 to 20” years in managerial positions and these specifically included respondents who held senior positions of Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors in some HLIs.

Below is the discussion of the themes based on the findings. In fact, before tallying the themes with research questions, the researcher mapped the concepts that emerged from responses to make sense of the patterns. Thereafter the researcher attempted to identify categories and themes that enabled to discussion of research questions about the PR strategies deployed in the HLIs to influence corporate visibility.

Internal Influence

It was realized that some HLIs use internal influence as a PR strategy to illuminate their corporate visibility to the public. The HLIs firstly ensured the strategic use communications and secondly the deployment of PR Protocol and Etiquette to better position their HLIs in the minds of the people. While strategic communications imply with creatively and efficient ways of communicating the best message using proper channels of communications to the right target audience as well as use research to acquire feedback, PR Protocol and Etiquette issues associate with making good impression and avoid causing offence or embarrassment in order to avoid bad reputation (Zerfass et al, 2020). Regarding the strategic use of communications, some participant in the HLIs for example said:

...We strategically communicate and convince employers to provide space for intern or field practice... *(Interview; Higher Learning Institution A, Participant 2, Male, March 31, 2023)*

...Communication specialists explain complex issues in a language that everyone could understand, for example, the language of engineers or other professional jargons can easily be digested and disseminated to the society by PR specialists... *(Interview; Higher Learning Institution A, Participant 5, Male, August 22, 2023)*

It was indicated in the findings that PR practitioners in the HLIs were of the view that strategic corporate communications helped the HLIs build support for particular cause and shape the opinion of stakeholders on issues that have impact to the HLIs. Such observation coincides with Heide's et al (2020) study findings which showed that strategic communications helped the HLIs manage situations such as communications crises. It also implies that when institutions, in this case, the HLIs do not put into consideration about the approach for strategic communications they may be into risk of circulating the wrong information to public which may result into negative perceptions and wrong decisions in particular HLIs.

Interview extracts also showed that the HLIs through the PR Units have been strategically using PR and Protocol etiquette to edify the good standards of their institutions. Most important, the PR and Protocol etiquette have been used as tools to give HLIs edge to cultivate relationships with representatives and partners who visit the particular HLIs. This coincides with the Excellent Theorist, Grunig's (2017) who highlighted the importance relationship building among stakeholders to minimize the risk of tarnishing the image of organizations.

One may generally establish that internal stakeholders are integral to HLI's PR strategies. Their involvement in institutional activities significantly influences the perception of the external stakeholders towards the HLIs. The literature emphasizes the importance of internal communication and engagement in fostering a positive internal environment, which in turn strengthens the corporate visibility (Li et al, 2019). Also, institutions that successfully engage their internal stakeholders in their PR efforts often see enhanced commitment, loyalty, transparency and advocacy from these groups, leading to a stronger reputation (Miotto et al, 2020). Below is the second identified theme that enriched this study.

Media Engagement

Data revealed that HLIs through their departments of Public Relations excessively use various communication channels both the online and traditional as a strategy to illuminate their corporate visibility. They use media to disseminate information about the HLIs in order to make the public aware of the activities, endeavors and the policies of the HLIs. Given the fact that this theme required much attention, researchers had to explore further to add to the insight about the most preferred category of media and their relevance. The data subsequently revealed that most participants preferred social media over traditional media. Some participants for example said:

..I use social media...it is the most relevant one because it is easy to do evaluation and also have great impact...It's also cheap compared to other media (*Interview; Higher Learning Institution F, Participant 1, Male, May 25, 2023*)

This section therefore provides insight to practitioners in the PR field and other interested individuals that the work of PR in particular when striving to illuminate the corporate visibility of HLIs may not be possibly done without engaging media. Media has been essential tool in disseminating the institutional strategic messages to the target audiences. Also media engagement has been a crucial PR component in the HLIs, its ability to secure positive media coverage and manage media relations significantly illuminates HLI's corporate visibility. According to Kriyantono (2019) institutions that excel in media engagement often influence storytelling and thought leadership to position themselves as voices in the field, thereby contributing to institutional corporate visibility.

Internal Collaborations

Participants in particular the Vice Chancellors and Public Relations Officers (PROs) argued that for HLIs to illuminate their corporate visibility had to make sure that the PR Strategies were thoroughly implemented. In so doing, the PR Professionals were engaged into various activities in order to play part in organizing or coordinating the communication activities. These activities included such issues as exhibiting research activities and projects conducted in various units, departments and faculties of the Higher Learning Institutions. Some of the participants for example said:

....We own a very popular project called HEET. In that particular project we are recognized as communication experts and our main role is to ensure publicity... (*Interview, Higher Learning Institution A, Participant 3, Male, May 9, 2023*).

This implies that if PROs were not engaged into coordinating such activities the public including employees would not have been aware of what takes place within their HLIs. The above also justifies, for example, as why the PR and Communication Specialists in the HLIs prepare publications such as newsflash, info graphics and newsletters in both formats most of the times; print and hard copies for the purpose of disseminating the messages to staff members and visitors. They do so to keep them informed about the projects and other activities taking place within the HLIs. Such circumstances may suggest that had it not been with the involvement of

PR and Communications experts in the projects both the internal and external public could hardly comprehend the organization's activities and endeavors.

The findings also imply that when the PR specialists are involved in coordinating and organizing the communication activities, the task of creating and illuminating the corporate visibility becomes more manageable and meaningful, as one of the Vice Chancellors for instance said, "...So they have started to implement the strategies while before the office of public services was responsible...". The above quote also suggests that Public Relations Departments can do better when are not sublimated to other function something which scholars with great personalities in the PR profession like Grunig (2017) keep emphasizing.

One may basically suggest that the PR activities are utmost important in organizations in particular the HLIs because its executed strategies aid in interpreting individuals' attitudes within and outside the organizations. As PR Gurus such as Griswold (1948) posit that the Public Relations specialists identify and shape policies and the procedures in public interest and when involved in coordinating information activities, they help organizations earn public understanding and support.

Findings also indicate that the implementation of the PR Strategies would not have been thoroughly guaranteed without the support of the various units within the HLIs. It showed that the support to the Public Relations Units was mainly on finance, resource and information. Like any other endeavor to be achieved in the organizations, when attempting to execute the Public Relations Strategies budgets and financing are indispensable. One of the participants for instance said: "...The PR Department has its own budget and the coordinator, the members coordinate and arrange budgeting issues in relation to the activities that the Department intends to undertake over a certain period of time (*Interview; HLI A, Participant5, Male, August 22, 2023*). This implies that the Management of HLIs understand the importance of supporting the PR department financially in order that its objectives are achieved.

As a matter of fact, the Public Relations Practitioners need to plan for a set of activities or strategies, whether the campaign or independent activity within the institution that requires PR tactics before the actual execution of the particular plan. In most instances, the financial influence of the organization determines the success of the activities to be carried out in the PR department; however, creativity is also essential. In determining how the PR Departments were financially supported, some participants for example said:

...So we work in collaboration with respective units. For example, during 'Sabasaba' we engaged the Directorate of Undergraduate, during innovation week we engaged the Directorate of Innovation and Research issues and during 'NaneNane' we shall engage the Collage of Agriculture and in TCU events we invite admission people to explain to the visitors about the programmes we offer... (*Interview; Higher Learning Institution A, Participant3, Male, May 9, 2023*)

...We also get cooperation from trade organizations, Students' organization and others... (*Interview; Higher Learning Institution A, Participant2, Male, March 31, 2023*)

“...There are times we need financial support to sponsor certain events in public the University does support...” (*Interview; Higher Learning Institution A, Participant2, Male, March 31, 2023*)

The above quote implies that some PR practitioners were comfortably executing their duties and responsibilities because of the financial support they acquired from their HLIs’ management. This concurs with Anani-Bossman’s (2022) findings which explicitly showed when the PR Department obtains financial support from the management the focus will mainly be on building trust and institutional credibility which altogether add value to the corporate visibility of the institution. One of the Heads of PR departments in the HLIs for example said, “...Some schools may provide financial support to pay additional exhibitors and more booths to accommodate visitors during exhibitions and reduce the bulky of phone calls from customers.....” (*e.g. HLI A*).

The above quote suggests that when the PR Departments obtain financial support from the HLIs’ managements is not a loss. The sentence ... “reduce the bulky of phone calls from customers” may particularly mean that it was not just a support to executing the exhibitions activities but rather the extension to solve other queries that would rescue the institution from poor reputation or damage in that case, for example customer relations during such incidents as admissions.

The second support to the PR Department was the resources support which included human and material support. The material support entailed such issues as offices which were well furnished and working facilities. With regard to human resource support, some participants commended that the other HLIs’ units extended full support to the operations of PR Strategies. They acquired support from the various Departments and Directorates such as the Directorate of Undergraduate Studies, Research and Postgraduate Studies mentioning a few.

The findings may suggest that in order for Public Relations Strategies to be smoothly handled other institutional units ought to be supportive to PR motives and actions. PR and Communications specialists within the HLIs should not be isolated; every person in the institution has a Public Relations role to play, as Aikins and Adu-Oppon (2015) affirmed in their study findings that the whole HLIs’ community has a role to play in Public Relations, whether the management, non-teaching staff and staff members including the technical people, cross guards and/or cafeteria people. They all need to make sure the relationships among them and other stakeholders are maintained to ensure institutional favorable image, of which Public Relations practitioners coordinate the activities to illuminate the institutional corporate visibility.

The last but not least support to be identified was information support. A number of Public Relations Professionals admitted that they managed to implement the Public Relations Strategies due to information support they acquired from other Departments and individual members within the institutions. The quote by one of the PR Professionals in the HLIs “...Some of my colleagues offer hand support in terms of disseminating information in the form of posters and tweets...” (*e.g. HLI H*) advocated the essence of information support to Public Relations operations. The information support also helps PR acquire recommendations on how to go about the various institutional endeavors while taking into account not to damage the image and reputation of the institution.

Therefore, collaboration with internal stakeholders is a powerful strategy for illuminating HLIs' corporate visibility. The internal stakeholders can extend partnership to external stakeholders which may provide access to new resources and create opportunities for joint ventures that amplify the institution's presence in the public sphere (Edwards, 2018). One may also suggest that successful collaborations are built on clear communication and shared goals which often lead to enhanced visibility and credibility of the institution (Ferguson, 2018).

Stakeholders' Confidence

Stakeholders' confidence was identified to be one of the predominant themes in the category and themes that attempt to answer the research guiding questions for this study. Some participants in particular students and the management of HLIs were of the view that the PR strategies were essential in meeting the HLIs' goals and objectives. Similarly, the results had also shown that some HLIs became more accepted as they were endorsing and execute the PR strategies in their overall institutional plans and operations. Nevertheless, some interview extracts indicated that participants considered the PR strategies to be good and have an influence on the corporate visibility of HLIs. One of the presidents for students' association for example said:

... We normally come across advertisements and announcements about the programmes through the social media and other mass media *(Interview; Higher Learning Institution F, Participant 2, Male, June 17, 2023)*

Furthermore, the above quote imply that the certain HLIs that have become successful in illuminating their Corporate visibility maintain proactive media relations like organizing the media events, regularly issuing the press releases and foster relationships with journalists and media outlets, as thus it ensures their accomplishments and initiatives receive adequate coverage, which enhance further their visibility.

Similarly, the interview extracts showed that even the top management in certain HLIs specifically the Vice Chancellors accepted that the PR Strategies have an effect on the corporate visibility of HLIs. They for example said:

...I want to emphasize that yet Communications and Marketing Unit is a very important office in linking the HLIs and society in general because people have been complaining that the results of our researches have been stored in desks and libraries but we have realized that it our responsibility to make society understand the results of researches we do...And, it's the Communications and Marketing Unit that helps this University to disseminate the results of the researches which address societal problems... *(Interview; Higher Learning Institution A, Participant 5, Male, August 22, 2023)*

....This could not be possible if we do not invest in advertisements, exhibitions, CSR and other activities... *(Interview; Higher Learning Institution B, Participant 2, Male, May 10, 2023)*

Data also showed that the PR strategies helped in increasing awareness of HLIs' services and products. This could create an assumption that students' enrolment may increase as the particular HLIs' brand become more visible. This observation matches with Masele and Rwehikiza's

(2022) who found that when the HLIs' brand is visible, it allows stakeholders particularly the prospective students get familiar with HLIs' products and services without the actual visit to the institutions. Through the work of PR therefore, stakeholders such as students, funders, donors and employees including lecturers build confidence and trust towards the institution because they clearly understand the messages disseminated by the institution.

The observations by participants and scholars such as Masele and Rwehikiza (2022) also implies that favorable corporate visibility ensures maintenance of institutional images and reputations even when it is about to experience image or reputational damage, the PR mechanism can be used in the HLIs to help rescue the situation. Bundy et al (2018) also found that when the organization is accepted it means that it can easy build relationships with various stakeholders including the organizations that offer similar service, as such they will be able to collaborate in various activities that may be beneficial to both parties.

With regard to the aspect of recognition some participants argued that the more HLIs through the Departments of PR applied the strategies for illuminating corporate visibility is the more the public recognized the institutional brands and services it offers. Zeitzoff (2017) found in his study that increasing the institutional recognition can be accompanied by a number of PR strategies for example, deploying the social media and ensuring publicity of the institutions on various other traditional media such as radio and television, something which participants had also affirmed.

Kim (2020) found if used effectively, Public Relations can give the company the ability to overcome a number of obstacles as it goes beyond creating HLIs' recognition. It helps institutions create a long term impact to generations as it humanizes the institutional images such that the relationship build may last longer with acquaints audiences. One participant for example said, "...More people have joined this University because they have understood about its programmes ...". (e.g. HLI D). This implies that the HLIs that effectively deploy the PR strategies succeeded in attaining institutional recognition to the public which is essential in attracting key stakeholders who guarantee institutional survival. Powell (2024) Public Relations is not a magic bullet meaning that it requires consistency and mutual beneficial relationship to acquire long-term results. It can be assumed that Public Relations can be a powerful tool for increasing brand recognition and driving business growth if efforts are effectively applied.

In attracting customers, participants were of the view that the PR strategies aided HLIs to illuminate the corporate visibility such that people were attracted to particular HLIs. Some participants for example said: "...We also take advantage of the ceremonies to get best photos including the happy faces and beautiful graduation gowns to attract more students join the University..." This implies that a number of activities that PR undertakes intend to make the stakeholders in particular students attracted to the HLIs. This is in line with Provini (2019), Christensen and Gornitzka (2017) who found that the PRSs are especially necessary for the stability and survival of HLIs in the contemporary world in which the rapid growth of the international higher education system has put colleges and Universities under pressure of acquiring more students and stakeholders. In such situations, therefore, raising the profile of HLIs has become imperative (Collins, 2016).

Public Relations Practitioners in the HLIs therefore do a number of activities with the aim to improve institutional status and more importantly to attract students, lecturers, funders and donors. However, some participants were of the view that HLIs may go further particularly in improvising the quality of their services and do such activities as providing loans and scholarships to make prospective students attracted to the HLIs (*e.g.* HLI G) This participants' observation concurs with the findings of Ansoglenang et al (2018) about responses to the changing competitive educational landscape globally.

Ansoglenang et al (2018) highlighted several areas that need attention in higher education system; however, the researchers concluded that the standard of the quality control in implementation of the academic programmes must be given priority. This suggests further investigation in the area of corporate visibility and higher learning institutions to assess the extent to which the aspects identified in the category influence stakeholders' confidence as far as the HLIs' Corporate visibility is concerned.

Based on the above scenarios one may assume that it could be the HLIs have ignored immediate interactions with stakeholders therefore their confidence towards HLIs may be minimal. Additionally it may be concluded that the PR Strategies may not be necessary sufficient for corporate visibility of the HLIs but rather ensuring stakeholders' engagement and confidence towards the HLIs and the services it offers through regular updates and reports. That way the HLIs build trust and transparency, loyalty and sense of belonging among the stakeholders which is vital in corporate visibility of HLIs.

The theme stakeholder confidence is essential in maintaining and enhancing the HLIs' Corporate Visibility such that when external stakeholders build confidence towards an institution, they are more likely to advocate for it, participate in its activities, contribute to its success and ideally become its ambassadors. The discussion about this last theme in this scholarly work, necessitate stakeholders underscore the importance of trust, transparency and consistent communication in building and sustaining stakeholder confidence (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017). According to Ansoglenang et al (2018) institutions that prioritize stakeholder engagement foster strong relationships and in return the particular institutions enjoy higher levels of visibility and reputation.

Conclusion

The findings and discussion of this research generally reaffirms the necessity of strategic public relations in illuminating the corporate visibility of higher learning institutions particularly in Tanzania. The HLIs should consider about cultivating internal influence, media engagement, internal collaborations and foster stakeholders' confidence. That way, institutions can significantly enhance their public profile and reputation. These findings not only contribute to the academic understanding of PR in higher education context but also offer practical guidance for institutions seeking to manage the complexities of corporate visibility in a competitive environment.

Recommendations

The study recommends HLIs to develop comprehensive communication frameworks in order to reinforce internal influence which is essential in fostering corporate visibility. HLIs should also effectively collaborate with key stakeholders on such issues as shared goals and participatory initiatives to extend institutions' corporate visibility. Nevertheless, HLIs should actively engage media in their various activities so as to amplify HLIs' achievements and values through creating strong relationship with media personnel. Furthermore, the HLIs should cultivate trust and credibility in order to create stakeholders' confidence. Last though important, the study recommends further research on the themes to assess the way they manifest in diverse institutional context. That way, generalizability of the findings will be enhanced for broader insights necessary for the international higher education system.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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