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The Role of Strategic PR in Enhancing the Reputational Appeal of Universities in Uzbekistan: A Comparative Analysis of TSUE and KIUT

Fotima Chorjeva

Lecturer, Faculty of Public Relations and Management

University of journalism and mass communications of Uzbekistan

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

fotima.choriyeva.99@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper explores the role of strategic public relations in shaping and enhancing the reputational appeal of higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE) and Kimyo International University in Tashkent (KIUT). A comparative methodology was employed, incorporating content analysis of the universities' official websites and social media platforms. The study assessed the use of PR tools, visual identity, communication frequency, and institutional positioning. Findings indicate that KIUT adopts a more dynamic, audience-oriented strategy, whereas TSUE maintains a formal, academically focused communication style. The research demonstrates that a well-structured strategic PR approach significantly influences the perceived institutional brand, especially among prospective students. The results suggest that public universities in Uzbekistan would benefit from strengthening their digital communication strategies and developing comprehensive PR frameworks as integral components of reputation management.

Keywords: Strategic public relations; reputational appeal; university branding; higher education in Uzbekistan; digital communication strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

Amidst the growing competition among universities in Uzbekistan, institutional reputation and brand recognition have become critical factors for attracting prospective students, building strategic partnerships, and securing funding. However, most universities—particularly public ones—lack a coherent and strategic approach to managing their public image. Strategic public relations, despite its potential as a powerful driver of reputational appeal, is still largely perceived as a tool for disseminating information rather than a means of brand development and image positioning.

1.2 The Aim

This paper aims to examine the role of strategic public relations in shaping the reputational profile of universities in Uzbekistan. Specifically, it conducts a comparative analysis of the PR strategies employed by a public institution—Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE)—and a private university—Kimyo International University in Tashkent (KIUT). The study seeks to identify key strengths and weaknesses in their communication practices and to offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing institutional branding and communicative effectiveness.

1.3 Relevance and Significance

Strategic public relations has become an integral component of institutional competitiveness in the context of globalization and digital transformation. While universities in developed countries have successfully incorporated brand management and PR as structured disciplines within their

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communication frameworks, this process remains in its early stages in Uzbekistan. Comparative research highlighting the distinctions between public and private universities is particularly timely, as it enables more effective operation of university PR departments and the development of tailored communication strategies for specific target audiences. This study contributes to bridging both academic and practical gaps in the field of strategic communication in higher education within the region.

1.4 Terminology

- Strategic public relations (strategic PR) — refers to a structured, goal-oriented communication process aimed at building a long-term positive image and fostering sustainable relationships with stakeholders through diverse channels and tools. It is recognized as a core component of institutional reputation management and organizational communication.
- Reputational appeal — the degree to which a university is perceived positively by its key audiences (prospective students, parents, business partners, and governmental bodies), directly influencing institutional trust, enrollment decisions, and external partnerships.
- Digital communication — encompasses technology-based channels used for external engagement, including social media platforms, messaging apps, institutional websites, and video-sharing services. In higher education, digital communication plays a central role in shaping public perception and facilitating interaction with target audiences.
- University branding — the strategic process of creating a distinct and coherent institutional identity through visual, verbal, and conceptual elements that reflect the university's mission, values, and competitive advantages in the educational landscape.

2. Literature Review

Issues related to strategic public relations in higher education have long attracted the attention of scholars in Western academia. A foundational work in the field is the book by Grunig and Hunt (1984), where the authors conceptualize PR as a managed process of two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and its publics. This definition has served as the theoretical underpinning for numerous subsequent studies in the domain of educational PR.

In her study, Rhee (2017) investigates strategic communication practices at universities across Asia, emphasizing that the effectiveness of institutional PR efforts depends not only on the channels employed but also on cultural dimensions, the degree of institutional autonomy, and audience orientation. These insights are particularly relevant in the context of Uzbekistan, where universities vary significantly in structure (public vs. private) and administrative independence.

Nowacki's (2021) article analyzes the digital communication strategies of universities in Central and Eastern Europe, highlighting the role of university branding through online platforms and social media engagement. The author concludes that visual coherence, content frequency, and audience interaction are key drivers of institutional reputational appeal. These findings align closely with the observed contrasts between TSUE and KIUT.

In the local context, Sataeva (2022) examines barriers and opportunities for the development of PR in Uzbek higher education institutions. The author identifies a shortage of qualified PR professionals, insufficient funding for communication departments, and limited integration of PR into university-level strategic management. These issues underscore the need for empirical research comparing the communication practices of public and private universities within the country.

Institutional data collected from the official websites of TSUE (2025) and KIUT (2025), as well as from their Instagram and YouTube accounts, served as important empirical material. The analysis of

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their digital presence enabled a comprehensive assessment of content regularity, visual identity, thematic focus, and audience engagement strategies. A notable divergence emerged in institutional positioning: KIUT actively promotes its international profile, career opportunities, and student life, while TSUE emphasizes academic achievement and historical legacy.

Overall, the reviewed literature and empirical observations suggest that strategic PR in higher education is increasingly defined by personalized digital communication, visual branding, and active engagement with external stakeholders. However, within the Uzbek context, practices vary considerably: private institutions such as KIUT are more agile in adopting contemporary approaches, whereas public institutions like TSUE maintain more traditional, formalized models of communication.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative comparative research design. The primary methodological approach was content analysis of the official websites and social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, Telegram) of the selected universities, conducted in both Russian and English. The data collection and analysis period spanned from January 10 to June 1, 2025.

The selection of the case institutions was guided by their contrasting institutional profiles: the Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE) represents one of the oldest and most prominent public universities in Uzbekistan, whereas Kimyo International University in Tashkent (KIUT) is among the most dynamically developing private institutions with a distinct and recognizable PR strategy.

The analysis focused on the following parameters:

- frequency and consistency of content updates;
- thematic focus and visual coherence of published materials;
- communication style and audience orientation;
- presence and structure of website sections such as “About the University,” “News,” and “For Applicants”;
- engagement in rankings, academic events, and international initiatives.

To ensure an objective assessment, a qualitative rating scale (ranging from 0 to 3 points) was applied to each criterion. The collected data were then organized into a comparative evaluation table to facilitate cross-institutional analysis.

4. Results

A comparative analysis of the strategic public relations (PR) activities of Kimyo International University in Tashkent (KIUT) and Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE) was conducted across major digital communication platforms, namely Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube. The evaluation focused on the following six dimensions:

1. Posting frequency

KIUT maintains a consistent digital presence, averaging 4–5 Instagram posts per week, 3–4 updates on Telegram, and 1–2 video uploads per month on YouTube.

By contrast, TSUE demonstrates lower posting frequency: 1–2 Instagram posts per week, 2–3 Telegram updates, and one YouTube video monthly.

2. Visual identity

KIUT exhibits a well-developed and coherent visual identity, with consistent use of institutional colors (blue and white), logo placement, and unified graphic design.

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TSUE lacks a clearly defined visual strategy: most published images are unedited event photographs with no consistent branding or aesthetic cohesion.

3. Content and communication Style

KIUT adopts a youth-oriented approach to content creation, incorporating Stories, Reels, behind-the-scenes videos, student interviews, and event previews.

In contrast, TSUE utilizes a more formal communication tone, focusing on official announcements, lecture posters, and structured reports, with minimal engagement from younger audiences.

4. Communication channels

KIUT demonstrates strong cross-platform integration, aligning content across Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, and ensuring a unified communication strategy.

TSUE relies primarily on its website and Telegram channel, with sporadic and unsynchronized updates on Instagram and YouTube.

5. Positioning and unique value proposition (UVP)

KIUT positions itself as an international and innovation-driven institution, emphasizing career development opportunities, student life, and global partnerships—particularly with South Korea.

TSUE's communication strategy highlights its academic legacy, research output, and status as a public institution, with a focus on tradition and formal excellence.

6. Telegram channel engagement

KIUT's Telegram channel is dynamic and interactive, featuring announcements, job postings, study tips, emojis, and regular polls.

TSUE uses Telegram as a bulletin board for announcements, lacking visual elements or audience interaction.

7. YouTube content strategy

KIUT produces professionally filmed, engaging video content, including campus tours, student testimonials, interviews, and educational overviews.

TSUE's YouTube presence includes formal event recordings such as lectures, seminars, and ceremonies. Despite the good technical quality, the content lacks emotional engagement and dynamism.

Key observations and interpretations

1. Posting frequency: KIUT maintains a consistent and high-frequency content strategy, whereas TSUE follows an irregular and formal posting schedule.

2. Visual identity: KIUT adheres to a unified and contemporary visual style, reinforcing institutional branding; TSUE lacks a coherent brand identity.

3. Communication style: KIUT emphasizes interactivity and dialogue with its audience; TSUE relies on formal, one-way informational messaging.

4. Platform usage: KIUT demonstrates integrated, cross-platform communication; TSUE exhibits limited coordination across channels.

5. Positioning (Unique Value Proposition): KIUT projects itself as progressive, international, and career-oriented; TSUE focuses on institutional tradition and academic reputation.

6. Telegram engagement: KIUT's channel offers diverse, interactive content; TSUE primarily shares official notices with minimal user engagement.

7. YouTube content: KIUT produces dynamic, visually engaging multimedia; TSUE shares infrequent, mostly ceremonial videos with limited emotional appeal.

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The contrasting public relations strategies employed by KIUT and TSUE reveal two divergent models of institutional communication in Uzbekistan's higher education landscape. KIUT deliberately constructs a modern, engaging, and visually distinctive institutional image, effectively utilizing digital media to build trust and appeal among prospective students. Its strategic approach is grounded in branding consistency, multimedia engagement, and platform synergy.

Conversely, TSUE adheres to a more traditional, formalized model centered around top-down information dissemination and lacking cohesive visual representation. This disconnection between the university and its target audience—particularly prospective students—can hinder engagement, as the expectations of openness, interactivity, and visual sophistication go unmet.

This comparative analysis suggests that:

- Private institutions (exemplified by KIUT) demonstrate greater adaptability to the demands of the digital communication environment;
- Public universities (exemplified by TSUE) should reevaluate their PR strategies, moving beyond reporting obligations toward strategic communication thinking.

To enhance TSUE's institutional reputation and public appeal, the following measures are recommended:

- Develop a comprehensive digital PR strategy tailored to specific audiences;
- Implement consistent and recognizable visual branding across all communication channels;
- Strengthen interactivity and cross-platform integration to foster engagement.

Such a transformation would not only improve audience trust but also support public universities in maintaining their relevance and competitiveness in an increasingly saturated higher education market.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the growing relevance of strategic public relations as a key instrument in enhancing institutional competitiveness within Uzbekistan's higher education sector. The comparative analysis revealed that KIUT's communication strategy aligns more closely with contemporary expectations for university-level engagement, while TSUE adheres to a more traditional, institution-centered communication model.

This divergence corroborates insights from international scholarship (e.g., Rhee, 2017; Nowacki, 2021), which emphasize that private universities are more likely to adapt their PR strategies to meet market demands, emphasizing career orientation, internationalization, and digital interactivity. In contrast, public institutions tend to emphasize their status, academic legacy, and formalized communication, resulting in lower levels of interactivity and visibility among younger audiences.

Moreover, the analysis supports the two-way symmetrical communication model proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), which posits that PR strategies rooted in audience dialogue and mutual engagement tend to be the most effective. In this regard, KIUT's communication practices may be seen as a localized application of this model within the context of Uzbekistan's evolving higher education landscape.

Additionally, the use of consistent visual identity, storytelling techniques, and multichannel communication (Instagram, Telegram, YouTube) was found to significantly enhance the perceived vitality and accessibility of a university's brand. In the absence of these components, TSUE's digital presence appears less engaging and insufficiently tailored to the expectations of digital-native audiences.

Limitations of the Study:

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- No empirical research was conducted to assess audience perceptions among students and applicants;

- The analysis relied solely on content review without incorporating direct survey data;

- Internal institutional resources and structural barriers to PR implementation were not examined.

Nevertheless, the results provide a foundation for future studies involving mixed-method approaches and sociological surveys, which could yield deeper insights into the impact of strategic communication on institutional reputation and audience engagement.

6. Conclusion

This study confirmed that strategic public relations play a pivotal role in shaping the reputational appeal of higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. A comparative analysis of Kimyo International University in Tashkent (KIUT) and Tashkent State University of Economics (TSUE) revealed significant qualitative differences in their approaches to public communication.

KIUT exemplifies a comprehensive implementation of strategic PR: active presence across digital platforms (Instagram, Telegram, YouTube), consistent visual identity, frequent publications, curated content, and youth-oriented messaging. The university effectively employs contemporary audience engagement tools, and its positioning as an international and career-focused brand strengthens its credibility and appeal among prospective students and institutional partners.

By contrast, TSUE's PR strategy remains largely formal and information-driven, with limited utilization of digital channels, minimal visual branding, and low levels of interactivity. These factors contribute to a weaker brand perception among the younger demographic of education consumers.

Therefore, the KIUT case can be considered a potential model for modern PR practices in other Uzbek universities, particularly public institutions. To enhance their institutional reputation, universities like TSUE should:

- develop a comprehensive, strategic PR framework;
- strengthen visual branding across all communication channels;
- expand their presence in the digital media landscape;
- adopt a dialogue-oriented, participatory approach to communication.

The findings of this study offer practical insights for PR managers, university marketers, and institutional leadership, as well as theoretical contributions to the academic discourse on public relations and higher education branding in Uzbekistan.

Future research should incorporate empirical methods such as surveys and focus groups involving target audiences—students, applicants, and parents—to evaluate the perceived effectiveness and impact of institutional PR strategies.

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