

## THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*The unprecedented dynamics of information processes, the interdependence and openness to the outside of higher education institutions, and the importance of international structures and partnerships exert strong, complex and multi-dimensional pressures. It can be said that both the number and the strength of these forces exert pressure on the Romanian higher education institutions, so each of them must offer enough options to prove the transparency and respect for the public, as well as the overall incorporation of these principles as basic principles which must outline and define their actions. Thus, the process of public relations must be correlated with the areas of interest of the local community, of the business environment and of the social and architectural environment: communication must be correlated with all the relevant categories of public.*

**KEY WORDS:** *public relations, universities*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, there are different responses to public relations. Even more so in the university environment. It is necessary to have the appropriate attitude and innovative spirit for an education institution to engage in a proper public relations approach, to build with the existing resources an image and notoriety capital and then to manage it properly (Cutlip, 1994). Practically, visionary management at the level of the organization is needed to address a concept that is open to a variety of challenges and stakes (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994). The enrolment of a higher education institution in the public relations process is generated, on the one hand, by the fear of exposing itself to danger, in which case it will only engage in targeted actions that do not involve too high costs, and on the other hand by the need for image (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Advocating for public relations in the university environment cannot cover all the meanings of the concept, unless it is developed and integrated into the dynamics of the university (Macnamara, 1999).

The concept of *university public relations* refers to an integrated set of policies, practices, programs which must be considered in the university processes and subsequently shared by all its members. A real approach to public relations in Romanian universities implies a new vision that implies the relation to the extremely dynamic current context. University public relations are an essential

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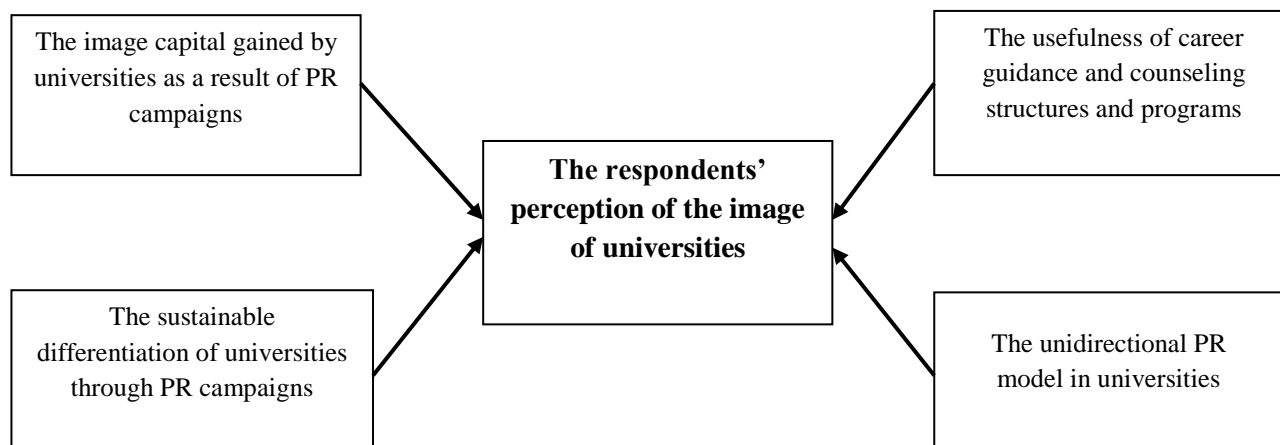
element for the long-term success of an organization, in direct connection with the performance of the community.

We are currently witnessing a boosting of the Romanian university environment, which is marked by the strong competition of foreign universities, not only in terms of educational offer, but also in the field of communication and the system of public relations, respectively communication performances. In this context, Romanian universities should learn from the experience of foreign universities and adopt, as a first step, follow-up strategies.

Practically, this strategic formula can materialize by adopting an optimal formula of strategic elements which are based on the organizational profile of the Romanian university, capitalizes on the opportunities offered by the external environment for visibility and image both at national and international level and is in line with future trends of public relations worldwide.

## 2 CORRELATION STUDY ON THE INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGNS ON THE IMAGE OF ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

To test the impact of public relations campaigns on the public's perception of the image of Romanian universities, we considered it appropriate to build a conceptual model (Figure no. 1), involving four independent variables, associated with specific public relations activities in Romanian universities, and a dependent variable: the perceptions of the 350 respondents regarding the image of the Romanian universities.



**Figure 1. The conceptual model of the correlational study**

*Source:* processed by the authors

Analyses specific to descriptive statistics were the pillars for the validation of the conceptual model, as well as for the four hypotheses of the correlational study.

The first statistical analysis of the conceptual model involved the determination of the means and the standard deviations of the four independent variables, each of which was built on the Likert scale. If, in the case of the first three items, the values of the means reflect the understanding of the benefits of the PR campaigns on the image of the Romanian universities, the unexpectedly high average for the fourth item demonstrates that the respondents perceive the negative realities of the unidirectional PR model in universities (Table 1).

The processing of data regarding the reliability of the conceptual model in the SPSS software leads to the determination of Cronbach's alpha indicator (0.850), which indicates a very high level of internal consistency and implicitly validates the relevance of the model (Table 2).

**Table 1. Statistics on independent variables**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
The image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns	1.84	.968	350
The sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns	1.78	1.046	350
The usefulness of career counselling and guidance structures/programs	1.53	.916	350
The unidirectional PR model in universities	2.40	1.282	350

**Table 2. The internal consistency of the conceptual model determined by Cronbach's Alpha**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.850	.855	4

The correlations between a specific item and the rest of the items in the model illustrate that the best placed is item 4: The unidirectional PR model in universities, obtaining a correlation index of 0.725; the item with the lowest correlation degree turns out to be the Image Capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns (0.640). Analysing the values in the "Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted" column, we note that none of the four items exceeds the Cronbach alpha value of the entire model (0.850), which means that the 4 items are validated from the perspective of internal consistency (Table 3). In addition, this statistical validation demonstrates a good understanding of the conceptual model by the majority of respondents.

**Table 3. Statistical analyses by the independent variables of the conceptual model**

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
The image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns	5.71	8.004	.640	.413	.829
The sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns	5.77	7.276	.722	.524	.795
The usefulness of career counselling and guidance structures and programs	6.02	7.951	.708	.507	.806
The unidirectional PR model in universities	5.15	6.182	.725	.532	.803

### Testing the hypotheses of the correlational study

The hypotheses (H1 H2) were built on the basis of the interdependence relations expected to exist between the four independent variables of the conceptual model and the dependent variable.

**H1 - The image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns greatly influences the respondents' perception of the image of universities.**

The contingency table for the H1 hypothesis highlights the distribution of the answers to the questions related to the two intersected variables (Table 4).

The testing of the H1 hypothesis by the Chi-Square method (Table 5) illustrates that the value of asymptotic significance tends to zero, while the Pearson Chi-Square value (244.292) is much higher than the table value of this indicator (26.296), while there are 16 degrees of freedom and a confidence interval of 95% (the table value is available on the website: <https://www.easycalculation.com/statistics/chisquare-table.php>).

**Table 4. Contingency table for the H1 hypothesis**

		The respondents' perception of the image of universities					Total
		Very good	Good	Indifference	Poor	Very poor	
The image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns	Fully agree	37	99	7	6	5	154
	Agree	9	40	11	66	7	133
	Neither agree, nor disagree	6	2	3	7	17	35
	Disagree	3	1	0	2	15	21
	Fully disagree	1	1	0	0	5	7
Total		56	143	21	81	49	350

**Table 5. The Chi-Square Tests test for the H1 hypothesis**

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	244.292 <sup>a</sup>	16	.000
Likelihood Ratio	223.679	16	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	100.289	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	350		

a. 11 cells (44.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .42.

As a consequence, the hypothesis is accepted: the image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns greatly influences the respondents' perception of the image of universities.

To validate the H1 hypothesis, we made recourse to additional statistical methods, the Pearson R test, the Spearman correlation coefficient and the unidirectional ANOVA.

The values of the indicators Pearson's R (0.536) and Spearman Correlation (0.543) demonstrate a strong dependency relationship between the two variables included in this hypothesis (Table 6).

**Table 6. Validation of the H1 hypothesis by means of the Pearson R and Spearman tests**

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.536	.052	11.846	.000 <sup>c</sup>
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	.543	.049	12.075	.000 <sup>c</sup>
N of Valid Cases		350			
a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.					
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.					
c. Based on normal approximation.					

The multiple comparisons between the means of the independent variable associated with the H1 hypothesis, which is the preliminary step for the ANOVA analysis (Table 7), show the differences between the mean scores of the independent variable: The image capital gained by universities as a

result of PR campaigns, the accepted level of significance being set to 0.05 (as with the Chi-Square test).

**Table 7. Multiple comparisons between the means of the independent variable associated with the H1 hypothesis**

The dependent variable: The respondents' perception of the image of universities

The independent Variable: The image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns

(I) The image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns	(J) The image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Fully agree	Agree	-1.185*	.131	.000	-1.54	-.83
	Neither agree, nor disagree	-1.791*	.207	.000	-2.36	-1.22
	Disagree	-2.210*	.257	.000	-2.92	-1.50
	Fully disagree	-2.019*	.428	.000	-3.19	-.85
Agree	Fully agree	1.185*	.131	.000	.83	1.54
	Neither agree, nor disagree	-.606*	.210	.034	-1.18	-.03
	Disagree	-1.025*	.260	.001	-1.74	-.31
	Fully disagree	-.835	.429	.296	-2.01	.34
Neither agree, nor disagree	Fully agree	1.791*	.207	.000	1.22	2.36
	Agree	.606*	.210	.034	.03	1.18
	Disagree	-.419	.306	.646	-1.26	.42
	Fully disagree	-.229	.458	.987	-1.49	1.03
Disagree	Fully agree	2.210*	.257	.000	1.50	2.92
	Agree	1.025*	.260	.001	.31	1.74
	Neither agree, nor disagree	.419	.306	.646	-.42	1.26
	Fully disagree	.190	.483	.995	-1.13	1.52
Fully disagree	Fully agree	2.019*	.428	.000	.85	3.19
	Agree	.835	.429	.296	-.34	2.01
	Neither agree, nor disagree	.229	.458	.987	-1.03	1.49
	Disagree	-.190	.483	.995	-1.52	1.13

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The application of the ANOVA test for the H1 hypothesis leads to the determination of the statistical indicator F (Fisher), by dividing the inter-group quadratic mean (51.196) by the intra-group quadratic mean (1.225) - Table 8

By comparing the value of F calculated ( $F = 41.784$ ) to the values found in the statistical table ([http://www.socr.ucla.edu/applets.dir/f\\_table.html](http://www.socr.ucla.edu/applets.dir/f_table.html)), in function of the significance threshold chosen to reject the null hypothesis (considering the fact that the inter-group quadratic mean has two degrees of freedom, and the intra-group quadratic mean has 345 degrees of freedom) we notice that the calculated F is higher than the value of F from the table (2.3719).

This result confirms that the obtained F ratio is statistically significant, the null hypothesis is rejected, so there is a strong influence between the means of the groups of variables. In conclusion,

the image capital gained by universities as a result of PR campaigns greatly influences the respondents' perception of the image of universities.

**Table 8. Application of the ANOVA test for the H1 hypothesis  
 The respondents' perception of the image of universities**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	204.785	4	51.196	41.784	.000
Within Groups	422.712	345	1.225		
Total	627.497	349			

**H2 - The sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns greatly influences the respondents' perception of the image of universities**

The contingency table for the H2 hypothesis highlights the distribution of answers to the questions associated to the two intersecting variables (Table 9).

**Table 9. Contingency table for H2 hypothesis**

		The respondents' perception of the image of universities					Total
		Very good	Good	Indifference	Poor	Very poor	
The sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns	Fully agree	47	111	8	8	8	182
	Agree	8	22	10	59	6	105
	Neither agree, nor disagree	1	10	3	8	13	35
	Disagree	0	0	0	4	10	14
	Fully disagree	0	0	0	2	12	14
Total		56	143	21	81	49	350

The testing of the H2 hypothesis by the Chi-Square method illustrates that the value of asymptotic significance tends to zero, while the Pearson Chi-Square (262.620) is much higher than the table value of this indicator (26.296), while there are 16 degrees of freedom and a confidence interval of 95% (Table 10).

**Table 10. Chi-Square Tests for the hypothesis H2**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	262.620 <sup>a</sup>	16	.000
Likelihood Ratio	238.297	16	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	141.961	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	350		

a. 10 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .84.

Consequently, the hypothesis is accepted: the sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns greatly influences the respondents' perception of the image of universities.

The values of the indicators Pearson's R (0.638) and Spearman Correlation (0.635) demonstrate a strong dependency relationship between the two variables included in this hypothesis (Table 11). Compared to the first hypothesis, we see in this case a higher degree of interdependence between variables.

**Table 11. Validation of the H2 hypothesis by means of the Pearson R and Spearman tests**

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.638	.032	15.447	.000 <sup>c</sup>
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	.635	.038	15.325	.000 <sup>c</sup>
N of Valid Cases		350			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

c. Based on normal approximation.

The multiple comparisons between the means of the independent variable associated to the H2 hypothesis (Table 12) indicate the differences between the means of the scores associated to the independent variable: the sustainable differentiation on of universities through PR campaigns, the accepted level of significance being set to 0.05.

**Table 12. Multiple comparisons between the means of the independent variable associated to the H2 hypothesis**

The dependent variable: The respondents' perception of the image of universities

The independent variable: The sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns

(I) The sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns	(J) The sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Fully agree	Agree	-1.309*	.123	.000	-1.65	-.97
	Neither agree, nor disagree	-1.623*	.186	.000	-2.13	-1.11
	Disagree	-2.709*	.279	.000	-3.48	-1.94
	Fully disagree	-2.852*	.279	.000	-3.62	-2.09
Agree	Fully agree	1.309*	.123	.000	.97	1.65
	Neither agree, nor disagree	-.314	.197	.500	-.85	.23
	Disagree	-1.400*	.287	.000	-2.19	-.61
	Fully disagree	-1.543*	.287	.000	-2.33	-.76
Neither agree, nor disagree	Fully agree	1.623*	.186	.000	1.11	2.13
	Agree	.314	.197	.500	-.23	.85
	Disagree	-1.086*	.319	.007	-1.96	-.21
	Fully disagree	-1.229*	.319	.001	-2.10	-.35
Disagree	Fully agree	2.709*	.279	.000	1.94	3.48
	Agree	1.400*	.287	.000	.61	2.19
	Neither agree, nor disagree	1.086*	.319	.007	.21	1.96
	Fully disagree	-.143	.381	.996	-1.19	.90
Fully disagree	Fully agree	2.852*	.279	.000	2.09	3.62
	Agree	1.543*	.287	.000	.76	2.33
	Neither agree, nor disagree	1.229*	.319	.001	.35	2.10
	Disagree	.143	.381	.996	-.90	1.19

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Applying the ANOVA test for the H2 hypothesis leads to the determination of the statistical indicator F (Fisher), by dividing the inter-group quadratic mean (69.283) by the intra-group quadratic mean (1.016) - Table 13.



**Table 13. The application of the ANOVA for the H2 hypothesis**

The perception of respondents on the image of universities

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	277.131	4	69.283	68.222	.000
Within Groups	350.366	345	1.016		
Total	627.497	349			

By comparing the value of F calculated ( $F = 68.222$ ) to the values found in the statistical table ([http://www.socr.ucla.edu/applets.dir/f\\_table.html](http://www.socr.ucla.edu/applets.dir/f_table.html)) in function of the significance threshold chosen to reject the null hypothesis (taking into account that the inter-group quadratic mean has two degrees of freedom, and the intra-group quadratic mean has 345 degrees of freedom) we notice that the calculated F is higher than the value of F from the table (2.3719). This result confirms that the obtained F ratio is statistically significant, the null hypothesis is rejected, so there is a strong influence between the means of the variable groups. In conclusion, the sustainable differentiation of universities through PR campaigns greatly influences the respondents' perception of the image of universities.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Practically, elements such as the learning environment, reputation, the career prospects of graduates, the image of the area in which the university is situated and their integration as dimensions within public relations campaigns are the effect of a standardized strategy beneficial to the Romanian educational market.

We can conclude that higher education institutions are in the process of creating a strong identity, and public relations are the inherent attributes of this process that can make a difference between a strong university, well-rated nationally and internationally, and a weaker university.

It can also be concluded that in the university environment the image is the operational result influenced by the resources that the institution's management is willing to allocate to PR activities, and the intensification of the latter may have a consistent impact on the performance of the higher education institution in terms of attracted funds, number of students, research contracts carried out or collaboration agreements with the private environment.

We recommend for this period that Romanian universities capitalize on the openness and opportunities offered by the international educational market, the demands of employers in the country and abroad, the rapid pace of the modernization of the communication technologies, the unprecedented development of the activity of public relations professionals (PR agencies) etc.

*The optimal strategic formula* implies an adaptation behaviour based on the following (Wilcox, Cameron, Agee, 2006): correct and real-time information within the educational market relative to the demand for specialists, the stimulation of the demand for certain study programs, at bachelor level, as well as at master and doctoral levels, the differentiation of the educational offer.

The strategy must also be accompanied by a specific, unrestricted budget, pursuing clear and precise objectives targeted to the objectives of each university and to the desired scale.

In the category of the *priorities* to be considered in the process of implementation of the public relations strategies at the level of the Romanian universities we can mention:

- Ensuring the increase of the competitiveness of the Romanian universities;
- Professionalizing the management and including in the organizational structure of a structure that manages the public relations process;
- Elaborating public relations strategies and policies with a marked creative character for both the internal and the external public;



- Monitoring crisis situations;
- Collaborating with a specialized public relations agency that can offer expert advice;
- Aligning to new communication technologies and methods for processing and transmitting information.

The universities' approaches to public relations need to be supported with various measures by the management team, in the sense of a framework that favours communication and widens the communication horizon with beneficial effects on the efficiency of university processes.

The management of university public relations will allow for real progress in understanding the specific features of communication within these institutions and their impact on the management team's decisions and practices (Steyn, 2006).

Thus, by adopting the new orientation, the management of the university will also have to consider the organizational structure in communicational terms (Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter, Zerfass, 2009). In this sense, changes can occur through the emergence of a new department, i.e. the public relations department, in which the developed activities are closely related to all other elements with communicational value within the organization.

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