Public Relations and Identity Management Issues: an Autoethnography of a Ugandan University

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Abstract

This study examines how I and other Public Relations (PR) practitioners of a Ugandan university experienced the way the institution’s actual and communicated identity was constructed and managed by its top management, Public Relations Officers (PROs) and the media. It also examines factors that influenced how the institution’s identity was constructed and managed or not managed by top management and the PROs.

As a methodological point of departure, the study uses three stories of my lived experience to construct an autoethnography of how I experienced the institution’s identity management practices and challenges. To attain validity of this highly subjective method, I combine my personal account with dialogue accounts derived from interviews with nine former and current PROs, five Vice-Chancellors and a University Secretary in order to achieve a reflexive and analytic autoethnographic approach.

Using Balmer’s (2001) functionalist conception of identity with its seven new identity management mix components (i.e., strategy, structure, communication, culture, environment, stakeholders and reputation) as a theoretical analytical lens, the study observes that resource is a key factor in identity management. It proposes addition of ‘resource’ as the eighth component to Balmer’s (2001) new identity management mix. The study makes a contribution to understanding PR in Uganda, drawing from a higher education institutional context. It demonstrates how factors of resource, communication structure, dynamic environment, and management’s leadership style, perception of PR and control of its access to information can impact on effective organisational identity management. It also shows the merits of decentralisation of the PR function to efficient identity management of complex organisations.

Keywords: identity management, organisation, PR, Uganda, autoethnography, resource, access to information, communication structure, management perceptions, environment.
Introduction

Organisational identity is concerned with answering the basic questions of: ‘who we are’, ‘what we stand for’, ‘what is our core purpose?’ and ‘what does it mean to be involved in this organization?’ (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007, p.61). Balmer (2001) defines it as:

>a summation of those tangible and intangible elements that make any corporate entity distinct. It is shaped by the actions of corporate founders and leaders, by tradition and the environment. At its core is the mix of employees’ values... It is…a melding of strategy, structure, communication and culture. It is manifested through...organizational performance…and behavior…(p. 280).

Balmer’s (2001) definition is relevant to this study as it enumerates the tangible and intangible elements that make an organisation distinct. These include: actions and behavior of the organisation’s leadership, leadership style, traditions, environment, values, strategy, structure, communication, behavior and culture. These factors are what Balmer (2001) advances as key components of the ‘new identity management mix’ (p.263). They form the central components that will be analysed when examining how I experienced the way the institution constructed and managed its actual and communicated identity.

This study aims to contribute an additional factor to Balmer’s (2001) identity management mix, that is, the factor of resource. It observes resource and other issues: (i.e. access to management information, management appreciation of a professional function, the dynamic environment, and communication structure) as influencing the way the institution managed or failed to manage its actual and communicated identity. The factor of resource in particular though identified in this study as a core component of both actual and communicated identity management has not been thoroughly articulated in the identity management literature. It has, however, received much attention in the reputation literature (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). This may be partly due to the fact that most studies on identity management have developed theoretical frameworks grounded in field research undertaken from the US and UK which are developed contexts.

This paper has the ambition of introducing the factor of resource to identity management drawing from my lived experience as Public Relations Officer (PRO) of a university in Uganda, East Africa. For purposes of meeting the ethical standards of autoethnographies, the university name and names of study participants will not be disclosed. Nevertheless, the selected university provides a good case study of university identity management as the institution has been undergoing many identity changes. These are mostly influenced by factors external to its environment, such as commercialisation and globalisation of the higher education industry. It therefore presents a good case study for understanding factors shaping actual and communicated identity management in East Africa’s higher education sector.

In analysing this institution, I draw insights from my own experience and that of its former and current PR practitioners who practiced at the university’s top management level before, during and after my time. By combining my experience and that of my colleagues, the paper employs a reflexive autoethnographic approach. Using this combined experience as a methodological basis the study aims to answer the following research questions:
1. How did I and other PR practitioners experience the way the institution’s actual and communicated organisational identity was constructed and managed by the institution’s top management, Public Relations Officers (PROs) and the media?

2. What factors influenced how top management and the PR practitioners constructed and managed or failed to manage the institution’s actual and communicated identities?

In their AC²ID test framework Balmer and Greyser (2002) identified five identities present in any organisational entity. These are: 1) actual; 2) communicated; 3) conceived; 4) ideal; and 5) desired identities (pp 72-76). This paper focuses on examining actual and communicated identity management where actual identity is understood as “an examination of who or what the organization really is” (van Riel, 2011, p.28). Communicated identity is about “who or what the organization says it is” (Bronn, Engell & Martinsen, 2006, p.887).

Actual identity is shaped by a number of elements which include, “ownership, the leadership style of management, organisation structure, business activities and markets covered, the range and quality of products and services offered and overall business performance” (Balmer & Greyser, 2002, p. 73). It is also revealed by the set of values held by management and employees. Actual identity pertains to what the organisation really is, which is often a function of performance, structure, behavior, values, culture, environment and resource as the study will reveal. Bronn, et al., (2006) demonstrate that values and behavioral actions of top management and stakeholders are central to shaping the actual identity of an institution. Thus, this study examines behavioral actions of top management as they are central to shaping the institution’s actual identity. Communicated identity is constructed and managed based on what the organisation says it is. This is often stated through controllable and non-controllable communications. Controllable communications include advertising, sponsorship and public relations while non-controllable communications include word of mouth and media messages (Balmer & Greyser, 2002, Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

As a point of departure the study focuses on analysing two of these identity mix attributes as they link to concepts of actual and communicated identity respectively. These are: 1) behavior/culture; and 2) communication. Only top management behavior and actions are analysed as top management are considered key ‘guardians of identity’ (Balmer & Greyer, 2003, p. 39). Balmer and Greyer (2003) note that, “it is the task of corporate leadership group to manage identities so that they are broadly consonant with each other” (p.18). The factor of communication is analysed through the work experiences of the PROs and their engagement with the media.

Public Relations (PR) has been normatively defined as a strategic communication management function (Broom, 2009). As a strategic management function, PR is claimed to have the ability to manage both realms of actual and communicated identity, where communicated identity includes controlled and uncontrolled communications. For the analysis of controlled communication, the PR’s relationship with top management will be examined, while for the uncontrolled communications, only the PR’s work experience with the media will be analysed. Other factors that are analysed include the role of the environment, organisational PR/communication structure, PROs access to information and resources and its impact on identity construction and management.

For its methodological approach, the study selects three short stories of my lived PR work experience in a Ugandan university. These stories demonstrate a firsthand experience of how the institution’s actual and communicated identity was constructed and managed. The stories are drawn from experience of: 1) Existing management culture, understanding and
appreciation of PR; 2) Management of negative press in the midst of resource constraints and changing environment 3) Control of information flows in the midst of an adhoc and non-institutionalised PR structure. By employing an autoethnographical approach to studying a university PR work experience, I position this work in line with recent PR autoethnographical works such as James (2012) and de Andrade (2014). This is in response to L’Etang’s 2012 PR Review special issue on ethnography that calls for PR practitioners to become the topic that they research as a way of adding on to the few ethnographic studies in the discipline. Additionally, autoethnography is a means through which identity researchers can reveal actual identities of organisations by studying their lived experiences of what organisations actually do versus what they say they are or do.

**Literature Review**

The notion of identity is an existential question, aimed at defining who or what an individual or organisation is, what they stand for; their values, beliefs, traditions, culture, characteristics and behavior (Balmer, 2001). Organisational identity is said to constitute a “… collection of attributes that members use to describe an organization” (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007, p.67). These attributes that define ‘who or what the organization is or stands for’ are derived from three major expressions of identity, i.e., Communication, Behavior and Symbolism (CBS) (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007, pp.63-65). These three attributes constitute what Birkigt and Stadler (1986) called the identity mix through which the organisation reveals its identity attributes. Communication manifests the identity of the institution through communicated messages. Behavior reveals the identity through varied individual or collective actions of the organisation’s management and its stakeholders. Actions are said to be by far, "the most important medium through which identity is expressed" (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007, p.68). Symbols reveal the organisation’s identity through artifacts as well as through written, audio, video and visual symbols such as logos, emblems, signs, architecture, sounds, taglines, livery and letterheads which articulate and differentiate the institution’s unique characteristics and attributes, making it recognisable. Balmer (2001) observed gaps in Birkigt and Stadler’s (1986) identity mix attributes and he articulated what he calls the ‘new identity management mix’ (p.263). The latter presents a mosaic of seven elements that require orchestration when managing the organisation’s identity. They include 1) strategy; 2) structure; 3) communication; 4) culture; 5) environment; 6) stakeholders; and 7) reputations. This paper selects to build on Balmer’s (2001) functionalist conception of the new identity management mix. A functionalist perspective views identity as moldable, controllable and manageable, but is this always the case? As a research gap, this paper observes the existence of another core attribute of the identity management mix that has not been articulated in the literature. This is the attribute of resource. Resource is seen as a factor that challenges the functionalist claim of manageability of identity. The paper builds on Balmer’s (2001) work because it is the most recent functionalist conception of identity in the literature that makes a strong theoretical contribution to the advancement of factors that influence identity management. Other studies such as Bronn et al., (2006) and Kantanen (2012) have applied his framework but not added to his new identity management mix components.

Thus, in this autoethnography, I examine the identity management challenges I experienced as a faculty PRO. I analyse them using Balmer’s (2001) identity management mix attributes. This is aimed at establishing whether Balmer’s seven identity management attributes were all evident in this institution. It also aims to establish what other factors/attributes besides Balmer’s contributed to shaping how the identity of the institution was constructed and managed.
According to Balmer & Greyser (2003), identity management is, “…strategic and is based on a company’s values, cultures and behavior” (p. 37). The strategic perspective to identity management is relevant to this study, as strategic involvement of PROs is not always guaranteed in some organisational contexts. Balmer (2002, p.80) notes that actual identity is internally constructed and managed by those who “make” the organisation; who are predominantly top management and to some extent PROs and stakeholders given their level of control and engagement in collective institutional identity construction. The communicated identity on the other hand is shaped by internal actors such as top management, PR staff and the organisation’s internal stakeholders. It is also shaped by external influencers such as the media and the organisation’s (internal and external) stakeholders who experience (d) the organisation and may influence its external identity (image and reputation) through word of mouth or mediated opinions of their personal experience(s). Contrary to the functionalist perspective of management’s ability to control the organisation’s identity, Theunissen (2014) questioned the assumption that the organisation’s actual identity can be “really controlled in the traditional sense” if principles of dialogue and co-creation are applied in organisation communication (p. 613) Theunissen’s study highlighted management’s limited ability to control an organisation’s identity when applying principles of dialogue in co-creation of organisational ideas. This paper espouses Theunissen’s argument of limited management control of identity by identifying the factor of resource as a key constraint to management and PR’s ability to control both the actual and communicated identity of the institution. It seeks to demonstrate that management and PR can be limited in their ability to manage the organisation’s identity given key identity shaping factors (i.e., resource, access to information and existing organisational communication structure) that are likely to hinder the attainment of a truly managed identity.

Reflexive Autoethnography as the Choice of Method

Autoethnography is a method that uses, “highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the researcher for purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p.21). Autoethnography seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

As a research method, autoethnography employs personal narratives, first person accounts or ethnographic short stories that emphasise the self (auto) the culture (ethno) and research process (graphy) (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). The self (auto) in this study is captured in narrative accounts of my personal work experience, while the culture (ethno) and research process (graphy) is captured by blending my experience with the experience of fellow PR practitioners who I interviewed as part of my research. A total of nine PR practitioners and five Vice Chancellors (VCs) and the university secretary were interviewed for this study. Four PROs served before, three during and two after my time. Three VCs served before, one during my time (2002-2004) and one after. The university secretary was included in the study as one of the PROs informed me that they lobbied for the inclusion of PROs in management meetings. In this paper I draw from my personal (auto) experience and that of others, with the goal of understanding the overall experienced PR culture (ethno) of the institution given its financial, managerial and structural organisational context. Reed-Danahay, (1997) notes that autoethnography is a research genre that connects the personal to the cultural; it places the self within a social context. The placing of self into a social context allows autoethnographers’ first person accounts to reflect institutional stories as affected by not just emotion per se but also by history, social structure and cultural context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This paper aims to attain this social context by placing this
autoethnography in the organisation’s prevailing managerial PR culture and organisational structure.

Autoethnography, especially the evocative genre, has been criticised for its subjectivity. Holt (2003) argues that being just a good story is not good enough. Rather the story should lead one to a deeper understanding of the broad concept under scrutiny by using constructive techniques to attain validity and reliability. To achieve reliability and credibility of this highly subjective method, I integrated this method with reflexive autoethnographic data analysis techniques. Reflexivity involves deconstructing who we are and the ways in which our beliefs, experience and identity intersect with that of the participant (MacBeth, 2001). This reflexive realisation occurs when individual thought and experience is analysed through dialogue with others that acknowledge not just the researcher’s own experience and perspectives but those of others. In order to achieve this, I integrated my personal accounts with accounts of fellow PR’s of the university, majority (7/9) of whom served at the central university administration level. The latter directed PR activities in the then 22 units of the institution while my experience was confined to a single faculty.

The use of reflexive constructive analytical techniques such as dialogue with other participants is one of the methods of attaining reliability and trustworthiness given the subjectivity of autoethnographic accounts (Lietz, Langer, Furman, 2006).

With regard to ethical considerations, I received consent from the informants cited in the study to use the collected data for academic purposes only. I also protect the identity of the informants, by not disclosing their real names or gender. This ethical observation is in line with Ellis, Adams and Bochner’s (2011) relational ethics recommendations to writing autoethnographies. Ellis et al., (2011) put more emphasis on the fact that, “the essence and meaningfulness of the research story is more important than the precise recounting of detail” (p. 9).

Overview of institution’s PR Background

The institution hired its first PRO in 1970. Until the mid 1990’s the PR office was occupied by a single PR staff offering PR support to the VC’s office. It was not until 2011 that the institution hired PR officers in each of its university colleges.

I joined the institution as a PR staff in 2002 and worked in this position till 2004. As a PRO, one of my core duties pertained to management of the faculty’s identity and reputation. The Faculty of Arts then was the largest faculty at the University in terms of student population. It had a population of over 5000 students in a university with 35,000 undergraduate and 5500 postgraduate students. It was also one of the few faculties in the institution that had hired a PRO, a move motivated by the faculty management’s internal need to address public misconceptions about the value and benefits of some of the courses taught at that faculty. The faculty also wished to market its courses to prospective students following the post 1990 privatisation of higher education (HE) in Uganda in the context of externally influenced HE financing policy changes. Thus the drive to hire a PRO in this faculty was motivated by both internal and external factors.
My Autoethnography

I select the following three narrative accounts as a basis for depicting the operational challenges that I and other PROs faced in our work.

1. Prevailing Management Culture, Understanding and Appreciation of PR

During the two years I served as the PRO of the Faculty of Arts, the existing culture, understanding and appreciation of PR by the faculty management was generally technical and not strategic. The PRO’s role was predominantly relegated to a technician role of writing press releases, rebuttals, newsletters, faculty handbooks, events management among other technical duties. The PRO was not a member of the faculty board meetings though the board addressed both academic and administrative issues which were of interest to the PRO’s since they were charged with the duty of managing the institution’s identity and media relations.

Meanwhile, my professional duties required that the Faculty Dean and I address media queries and shield the faculty from any unfounded bad press if and when information deemed damaging to the individual faculty members or the collective faculty as an entity found its way in the media. All these functions have a strategic management dimension to them as they require access to information that can aid the PRO to proactively construct and manage the actual and communicated identity of the institution. Nevertheless, the existing management practice was one that excluded PROs from management meetings then invited them during mediated reputation crises.

This work experience reveals the professional challenges and contradictions that lay in working as a reputation firefighter in an information guarded organisational context. Moreover journalists expected the PRO to have access to management information and often assumed the PRO just did not want to disclose the facts. This information access exclusion during times of stability and inclusion during times of crisis implicitly suggested that management’s behavior and understanding of PR leaned towards a technician rather than a strategic appreciation of PR. This reality was captured by one of the Faculty’s PR informants, when I asked their opinion of whether the faculty management perceived PR as a management function. They responded saying:

First of all, this is not a faculty of management….I would not really call PR in this faculty, as ‘the public relations function’, as it is not a full organ in this faculty….So for them, their perception of PR was public relations goes out there tells people exactly what you do and does it in a nice way. So I don’t see it as a structure…. It was so and so is a good speaker, come on board. So we did not have a clear structure of how things would run. It was about simply go out there and do it. But we realized it later that we needed to professionalize … (personal communication, Feb 19, 2010).

This informant paints a picture of a management whose understanding of PR was initially from a publicity, oratory and marketing perspective; with very little appreciation of its strategic relevance to management. This experience is in line with recent higher education PR studies in Germany that revealed that higher education PR staff activities were mainly
Another PR colleague also revealed exclusion from direct management information access when they noted that:

The top management had a communication management committee meeting every week. I never used to sit in that meeting; but on the other hand it helped that as the person who was reporting directly to the Vice Chancellor (VC) you could access the VC and ask him to get access to department decisions, which were made in the meetings. When the need arose for clarification on some issues, you could easily access him and may be it helped ... You could also access the minutes through the personal assistant ... So that was the arrangement … (personal communication, March 03, 2010).

The experience of this informant who served as the overall university PRO shows that, even at the university top management level, the PRO suffered similar challenges of restrictions on direct participation and access to management information and decisions as I did at the faculty level. However, this informant noted that PROs access to management information improved by 2009 following interventions by the university secretary (a senior member of the university management) who lobbied for inclusion of PROs in management.


My second experience pertains to the challenge of managing increasing negative press in the midst of resource constraints and a post 1990 privatised higher education and liberalised media environment. In my experience with the institution I recall a single incident when all the institution’s PR practitioners worked together to come up with a united defense of the institution’s identity and reputation against what was reported in the print media. That was when the University’s PRO consulted with our faculty PR Committee on how best we could respond to three complaint articles that had been published by students. One of the articles was about the work ethics of a particular lecturer in one of the faculties. The second was a complaint about the delayed renovation works at the University Chapel. The third was about the issue of retake fees and increment of re-examination fees charged to students who had to be reexamined in a course(s) they failed. One thing that stood out for me was how the committee members suggested realistic and convincing ways on how best to respond to all these three complaints. They suggested that it was best to re-assure the general public by informing them of the facts surrounding the raised issues. Secondly, they agreed on the need to correct exaggerated accounts that way, we would be able to present the actual identity of what the institution really was, versus what had been reported in the media.

For instance, on the issue of delayed chapel renovations they suggested that the realities of financial constraints that the institution faced be explained to the public. This is captured by the VC’s remarks when they noted that:
Limited resources notwithstanding, we were able to build a staircase which joined the university chapel ... Since the job took a long time to complete, I began to read critical letters in the local English dailies which I thought was uncalled for. Apparently, they were written as angry worshippers who had the misfortune of walking down the uncompleted staircase, stumbled, fell and ... sustained an injury in the process. They were apportioning blame to University Administration for negligence and for failure to complete the job...As usual, it was the ... 'let us expose' them mentality at work... The problem why the work ... was slow was mainly a cash flow problem... the money was coming in trickles. Luckily ... we were able to complete the job ... When the staircase ... was completed, I never saw a single article in the newspaper columns complementing the University Administration or Chaplain ... It ... reminded me of what I had heard some journalists say...‘when a dog bites a man, it is not newsworthy, but when a man bites a dog it is’ (personal communication, April 2010).

The above account shows that the university management sometimes suffered negative publicity over identity damaging issues that they would have addressed had their financial situation looked brighter than the miserable pittance that they had to work with. Consequently, with a management that was incapacitated to manage its financially related issues, the factor of resource constraints ended up affecting the institution’s ability to influence the construction and management of its actual and communicated identity. Granted, the mediated identity lacked some crucial facts that would credibly relay the institution’s actual identity. Nevertheless, the excerpt also reveals management’s relative naïveté of news media values (i.e., significance, identification or proximity, sensation, timeliness, conflict and influence of a country, institution or individual) as guiding what constitutes as newsworthy (Allern, 2011).

Besides the VC, a former central administration PRO (1991-1997), also underscored the impact that financial resource constraints had on the institution's ability to engage the media when they observed that:

...because of lack of facilitation, it became very difficult for the PR function to be utilized as much as possible...Neither would they (management) give you money for transport to interact with the media...Neither would they give you money to invite the media for a press conference (I am talking about the early 90’s here). But currently, there has been a realization of the need to facilitate this function as much as possible.... whereas I was alone in the office...now there are about 4 people ...If you look at the PR office of the 70’s, 80’s or early 90’s. It was really a function that was relegated to step child status in this university and that had its implications as far as facilitation is concerned. Meaning that facilitation was not adequate in terms of finances ... equipment ... staffing and so forth (personal communication, Feb 10, 2010).
The informant uses the metaphor of ‘step child’ to describe the PR status, a metaphor loaded with underprivileged and neglected overtones, yet PR is often perceived as a ‘firefighter’ and reputation rescuer in times of organisational crises. These PR metaphors reveal the contradictions inherent in diminutive resource allocations not matched with grand professional expectations in times of mediated identity crises. The table below shows yearly university budget allotments to PR activities.

Table 1. University Budget for Public Relations Office (1990-2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>(Amount in UGX)</th>
<th>(Amount in USD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>1,600,000</td>
<td>741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3,500,000</td>
<td>1,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5,000,000</td>
<td>2,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5,000,000</td>
<td>2,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>125,000</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>14,560,000</td>
<td>6,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>486,196,396</td>
<td>132,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>501,441,768</td>
<td>136,672</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: University Public Relations Office, Finance Department

The PR financing and staffing challenges captured by the informant and statistics above are in line with Kohring et al’s (2013) findings that PR departments in German universities have to function with “relatively poor personnel and financial resources” (p.172). Besides the factor of resource, a former university PRO (1999-2006) confirms the impact of the factor of changing media, institutional and societal environment when they note that:

People used to fight me saying that the public relations tenure of the PRO who served in the 1970’s was very good. But to me, I thought that these were different circumstances because during that time, the university was a fully funded government institution. Government funding was available so students were getting free allowances. It was really a different university...a leading university. So basically, we had to compete to get into the university...I think it was not good to compare our situation now and then. The institution was the only University then. There was no competition...Government was funding, students were happy, the university was much smaller, more organised. So our situation was different. Whatever I did in 1999, the private scheme was nearly coming to 10 years. Over population, liberalisation had come into the university...so the media had access. Those who reported in the media were some of the students who sat in our media classes. There was liberalisation of the media, so the media could report anything. In the past, the university was closed. I mean you would not just come in and report about a government institution. So the media had access, they were reporting openly any small issue that would come up ended in the press. The university is so big with so many outlets of information. Really the information would go out anyhow...So when I came
in, the University Secretary tried a lot to make a structure…it was not easy at first (personal communication, March 03, 2010).

This informant reveals a changing higher education environment and underscores the role of the liberalised media environment and lack of a communication structure in increasing the chances of negative uncontrolled media coverage of the institution.

3. Control of information flows in the midst of a Non-Institutionalised PR Structure

The third experience was in 2003 when the Faculty of Arts PR Committee initiated the idea of holding an academic fair. Besides raising publicity about the institution, one of the key goals of the fair was to allow potential university applicants to have an understanding of the teaching and innovations that were going on at the university. The event was open to all high schools, universities, the surrounding community and interested members of the general public. Since the idea had been initiated by the Faculty of Arts, we were tasked by the central administration to oversee the planning and implementation of this event. It turned out to be rather challenging in terms of coordination and establishment of contacts with faculty representatives who had a good understanding and experience in University PR events management. In the course of planning the event, it became apparent that only two faculties had a designated PRO none of whom had been recruited by the university’s appointment’s board. They were instead employed on a private arrangement through individual initiatives of some faculty deans that appreciated the necessity of PR in the day to day management of faculty activities. Since there were only two officers with a PR background, this meant that the rest of the 20 out of 22 faculties, schools and institutes lacked an experienced PR practitioner. Coordinating the flow of information internally within the different units became challenging. This challenge was also observed by the senior PR director (2007-2010) when they noted that:

...a major area of challenge like I said, because there has not been a clear definition of communication roles and mandates, it is really difficult to enforce or to monitor your communication flows. And so the scenario has been that anybody feels free to go and say anything about the university even where they are not being mandated to do so. That has been a major problem. Secondly, because ... we do not have a solid structural link between the units and the centre, you have a disjoint in communication flows, that something happens in a particular unit of the university and as PRO, you do not have the network contact officer who can quickly pick up a phone, call you and say this and this is happening. So we have often found ourselves working backwards. A journalist gets a tip, gets the story, by the time they are calling you, they are only calling you to get a quotation to fill up the story, (confirming) that after all we eventually got from the official voice of the university and here it is. But in terms of controlling that information, we are incapacitated absolutely. We have no early warning system to alert us of what is happening in the units (personal communication, Feb 5, 2010).
As the informant points out, the organisational PR structure then, was ad hoc, understaffed and devoid of a communication structure and policy leading to internal and external information control challenges. As one of the informants succinctly put it, because of lack of an institutionalised communication structure:

PR …was some kind of personal agenda of the person who was in power then … For the Faculty of Arts, the dean then had a vision for PR and he molded it so well. But when he left office, those who came after him did not realize that actually PR was very important and so it was toppled (personal communication, Feb 19, 2010).

Lack of an institutionalised communication structure and under staffing also led to challenges of control of institutional information outflows, leading to exaggerated and distorted representations of the institution’s communicated and actual identity which consequently impacted on the institution’s reputation. However, on 1st July 2011, the institution’s top management transformed the university from a faculty based centralised system to a collegiate decentralised system of administration. This allowed for devolution of power from the centre to the periphery. The implementation of this new decentralised collegiate management system allowed for structural changes and reorganisation in the way the PR function was organised. The new collegiate system allowed for each of the new 10 colleges of the university to get staffed with a Communication Officer and Web Administrator as shown in the organisation chart below.

Figure 1. Public Relations Office Structure

Public Relations Office Structure as of September 2012 to date
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So, where there was formerly an adhoc and non-institutionalised system characterised by inadequate staffing with one or two PR practitioners in the VC’s office, serving the 22 faculties, schools and institutes of the university, the new structure allowed for a PR presence in each college. As the then VC observed, “the staffing beef up was hoped to reduce the information gap that normally leads to students’ unrest” (personal communication, March 24, 2010).

Speaking from a faculty vantage point, the former chairperson of the Faculty’s PR Committee seemed hopeful about the levels of professionalism that the new developments in the University PR management seem to promise, when they noted that:

The function is much better appreciated and much better utilized now and I am hoping that they are getting results. Before we had some assembling of someone in PR but the assembling of PR then...Those were people who just talked about what the university did...putting out the university in the papers, putting it out on Uganda Television (UTV), mainly publicity... there were no innovations. But now why I am thinking it is better is that it is very focused. They have a timeline, they have a framework to follow and they know where they want to go (personal communication, Feb 19, 2010).

As the informant notes, changes in the organisation’s communication management structure not only provided a guiding road map for effective PR practice but also restored confidence in stakeholders’ appreciation of the function in the strategic management of the university.

Discussion and Analysis

Limited control of identity

Top management, according to a functionalist perspective of identity management, are believed to have the ability to “observe, mold and manage” the actual and communicated identity of an organisation (Balmer & Greyser, 2003, p.37). This argument is conceivable to a certain extent as some factors that constitute the actual identity of the institution were to a large extent in the realm of management control. Factors such as: leadership style, organisational structure, information access and information guarded values that management selected to guide PR behavior. Nevertheless, my experience and that of other PR practitioners revealed that management’s ability to efficiently manage a consistent and aligned actual and communicated institutional identity was undermined by a number of factors that were within and out of management’s control. Factors such as management culture, leadership style and communication structure were within management’s control as evidenced by the 2011 reorganisation of the PR structure. However, factors of financial resources and dynamic external environment were beyond management’s control to a great extent as management was often incapacitated in their ability to address them. This suggests that management has limited control of identity and factors of resource and environment are core organisational identity shaping issues.
Management’s Culture, Perception of PR and its Impact to Effective Identity Management

The study also showed that management’s existing culture, leadership style and perception of PR had negative consequences to identity management. Management’s perceptions of PR that were abound with misconceptions of the full professional scope of this function had double-edged consequences. They not only undermined the effectiveness of PR practitioners as guardians of the organisation’s identity, but also debilitating their ability to serve as ‘ultimate guardians’ of the organisation’s actual and communicated identity. Management’s leadership style was also one guided by the erroneous perception that PR was a technical rather than a strategic role. This led to under appreciation of the function expressed in treating it as a ‘step child’ when it came to access to management information and facilitation. These professional constraints had negative consequences to PROs attainment of their proactive identity management ideals. It also suggests that PROs could not achieve the normative ideal of serving as ‘boundary spanners’ and effective ‘relationship managers’ of internal and external realms of the organisation (Grunig, 2006). This is as they lacked access to the internal management realm, and so their ability to aptly bridge the information gaps between internal the external organisational realms such as the media were thwarted. Ironically, PR was treated as a darling child when mediated crises and scandals occurred but treated as a ‘step child’ on non-crisis days. This inconsistent prioritisation is a contradiction in itself since the business of identity management is an ongoing process whose relevance is not restricted to crisis times. Moreover, this sporadic and inconsistent prioritisation of PR only succeeded in cultivating an organisational PR culture that is more reactive than proactive in its approach to identity management.

Further still, the culture of excluding PR from accessing management information had the negative impact of causing delayed PR influence on news framing and shaping of the institution’s communicated identity yet news esteems the value of timeliness. This setup resulted in a communicated identity that was predominantly constructed by the media with limited PR influence.

Similarly, since the practitioners were then were locked out of direct access to management meetings but invited during media crises, most of the information they relayed to the media was obtained through second hand accounts. Yet second hand accounts bear the risk of distortion of facts and contextual meanings (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006). Exclusion also reveals that the practitioner then had been reduced to a powerless position with regard to their ability to make a timely proactive and informed rhetorical rebuttal to any mediated issue that was likely to misrepresent the actual and communicated identity of the institution.

Resource as a Constraint to Identity Management

The ability of the institution to efficiently engage the media in its actual and communicated identity construction and management was limited by the factor of resource. Inadequate resources led to understaffing, under facilitation and underutilisation of PR staff in their duty of proactive media engagement as a means of managing both the actual and communicated institutional identity. As Ihlen (2002) points out, “to be able to hire or employ expertise and establish a significant presence in the public arena over time generally requires resources…When an organization has a large, competent public relations staff this increases the likelihood of properly managing the organization’s relations to its environment” (p.264). However, with the financial constraints that the institution suffered, these ideals of effective actual and communicated identity management were not easily realisable unless the core factor of resource was resolved. This reveals the role of resources as central to identity
construction and management. It also shows that some identity shaping factors such as resources are to a large extent beyond management’s control. This finding of limited management control is in line with the findings of Theunissen’s (2014) study which showed limited management control of identity. While Theunissen’s study identified the realist factor of co-creation as challenging the assumption of a managed identity, this autoethnographic reveals the factor of resource as limiting the normative and functionalist claim of a fully managed and controllable organisational identity. It also suggests that identity management whether studied from a functional or co-creational perspective, reveals limitations of management’s ability to entirely control it based on certain intervening factors. Consequently this paper suggests the addition of the factor of resources as the eighth component to Balmer’s (2001, p.263) new identity management mix as illustrated in the image below.

Figure 2. The new identity management mix

THE NEW IDENTITY MANAGEMENT MIX

The Dynamic Operational Environment

The changing media, higher education and socio-political environment were also observed as factors that influenced management and PROs ability to control the institution’s identity. The changing liberalised media environment increased the frequency of uncontrolled media messages about the institution. These changes were factors that management needed to adapt to in order to cope with realities of their dynamic operational environment.
An adhoc and Non-Institutionalised University PR Structure

Another factor that impacted on how the identity of the institution was constructed and managed was that of lack of an institutionalised PR structure. The lack of an institutionalised PR structure revealed that the institution’s top management and PR lacked a framework with which to control and manage the internal and external actual and communicated identity. Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) definition of institutionalisation suggests that the choice of rules (or lack thereof) that govern a given society or social milieu also implicitly define its guiding principles, values, behavior and culture that shape its actual identity. So when the institution failed to define the rules governing communication, they implicitly defined their ineffective PR structure, principles, values, behavior and culture. A non institutionalised and non-decentralised PR structure gave rise to the cultivation of negative values and behavior. These exposed the institution as having an uncontrolled, unstructured and inefficient identity management value system, as without a communication policy (rule like) framework anybody could say anything to the press about the institution which endangered its actual and communicated identity. Lack of a decentralised PR structure also revealed the risk of frequency of mediated identities at the units that were not in line with the central administration desired identity perspective.

The lack of an institutionalised PR structure also revealed that PROs lacked the means (necessary professional framework) to effectively and promptly influence the outcome of the institution’s communicated identity. As Castells (2009) notes, what is “valued and institutionalized is defined by power relationships” (p.10). In this case, the exclusion from management meetings, information access and the non institutionalised PR structure were all indicative of the then powerless ‘step child’ status of the PR function.

Conclusion and Implications

Using an autoethnographic approach, this paper has revealed the various factors that affected the PROs and management’s ability to effectively influence the internal and external construction and management of the institution’s actual and communicated identities. These factors included management’s: 1) perception and understanding of PR; 2) control of access to information; 3) facilitation of PR’s controlled and uncontrolled communication management; 4) prevailing culture and leadership style; and the role of: 5) the changing environment; 6) existing adhoc communication structure; and 7) resources. All these factors, except the factor of resource are subtly captured in Balmer’s (2001, p.263) components of the new identity management mix.

The paper has underscored the role of management’s appreciation and understanding of a professional practice and how that impacts on the function’s status, positioning in the organisational structure and general efficiency with regard to strategic internal and external identity and communications management. In addition, this autoethnography established a link between resource availability and management’s ability to effectively address core actual identity management issues that are likely to affect both its actual and communicated organisational identity.

The study also underscored the necessity of the involvement of PROs in strategic management as their exclusion from strategic management processes and information access endangered their ability to efficiently influence a desirable construction of the institution’s actual and communicated identity.
The study revealed the merits of decentralisation and relative merits of centralisation of the PR function in complex organisations. It showed that whereas centralisation allowed top management to have direct control of the PR function. Decentralisation of the function allowed for its presence to be felt in every unit of the institution which allowed for better coordination of information flows and control of the organisation’s identity at the centre and periphery levels of management.

Lastly, the study also makes a contribution to understanding Ugandan public relations by offering insights to the challenges of identity management in a government institutional context.
References


