

## Understanding Students' Role in Higher Education Communication Co-Creation

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Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly operating within competitive, market-oriented, and digitally mediated environments. In this context, institutional communication has evolved from a predominantly unidirectional transmission model to a dialogic, participatory process. Students are no longer passive recipients of institutional messaging but active contributors to the creation, diffusion, and reinterpretation of university narratives. Despite the growing visibility of student-generated content, ambassador programs, and participatory campaigns, there remains limited theoretical and empirical integration of student co-creation within the domain of institutional communication. Existing research on co-creation in higher education has largely concentrated on pedagogical partnerships, curriculum co-design, and classroom-based value generation, leaving communication processes comparatively under-theorized.

This doctoral research addresses this gap by developing and empirically exploring a conceptual framework of student co-creation in institutional communication. Drawing primarily on Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), participatory communication theory, and higher education branding literature, the study examines how students contribute to communication processes in both online and face-to-face contexts, and how these contributions generate value for students and institutions alike.

Theoretically, the research builds upon the premises of SDL, which reconceptualizes value as co-created through interaction among multiple actors rather than delivered unilaterally by organizations. Within this perspective, students are understood as operant resources who integrate their skills, experiences, and social networks into communication processes. Institutional communication platforms, such as social media channels, ambassador programs, and campus events, function as engagement infrastructures that enable resource integration. Complementing SDL, participatory communication theory emphasizes dialogic interaction, mutuality, and stakeholder voice as foundations of relational legitimacy. Together, these frameworks position institutional communication not as a peripheral managerial tool, but as a core arena of value co-creation and identity formation.

The study proposes a circular conceptual framework in which student participation constitutes the primary input into co-created communication processes. Two forms of participation are distinguished. Online participation refers to student engagement through institutional social media platforms, including user-generated content, comments, sharing practices, and digital campaigns. Face-to-face participation encompasses involvement in events such as open days, orientation weeks, ambassador programs, and co-organized initiatives. These participatory modes converge within an interactive communication sphere where student and institutional inputs are jointly negotiated.

The framework conceptualizes communication co-creation as a dynamic process that produces value across two interrelated domains. For students, participation is expected to enhance satisfaction, strengthen institutional identification, foster engagement, and facilitate skill development in communication, leadership, and collaboration. For institutions, co-created communication enhances perceived authenticity, credibility, and brand relatability, contributing to stronger loyalty, advocacy, and reputational capital. Crucially, the model incorporates a feedback loop: increased student satisfaction and identification reinforce subsequent participation, generating a virtuous cycle of engagement and institutional alignment.

The research is guided by three core research questions:

- (1) How do students co-create institutional communication in social media platforms?
- (2) How do students co-create institutional communication in face-to-face contexts?
- (3) How is the effect of student co-created communication reflected in institutional identity and value?

Methodologically, the study adopts an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm. Ontologically, it assumes that institutional identity and communication value are socially constructed through interaction. Epistemologically, it privileges subjective meaning-making and context-sensitive inquiry. Given the exploratory and theory-building nature of the research, a qualitative design is employed.

Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups using a multi-stakeholder approach. Interview participants will include: (1) current students actively involved in communication co-creation (ambassadors, content creators), (2) students who engage passively with institutional communication, (3) prospective students, (4) alumni, (5) communication or marketing directors within HEIs, and (6) marketing and communication academics. This design allows for triangulation of perspectives across contributors, observers, institutional decision-makers, and external audiences. Approximately 10–15 interviews will be conducted, guided by thematic saturation principles.

Focus groups will complement individual interviews by capturing collective meaning-making processes. Two to three focus groups will be organized, segmented by participant type (current students with varying levels of engagement; alumni). The group format enables examination of shared narratives, norms, and perceptions regarding authenticity, representation, and institutional voice. Visual prompts such as social media examples or campaign materials will be used to stimulate discussion.

In addition to primary qualitative data, the study incorporates secondary data sources to enhance methodological triangulation. A qualitative content analysis of institutional social media platforms will examine instances of student-generated content, dialogic interaction, and participatory campaigns. Institutional documentation and feedback from face-to-face events will also be analysed to identify structural patterns of student inclusion and perceived outcomes.

Data analysis will follow a thematic approach. Transcribed interviews and focus group discussions will be coded iteratively, enabling identification of patterns related to participation modes, authenticity perceptions, communication quality, identification processes, and institutional outcomes. The analysis will move abductively between empirical findings and theoretical constructs, allowing refinement of the conceptual framework.

The expected theoretical contributions are threefold. First, the study extends SDL into the domain of institutional communication, reconceptualizing communication itself as a locus of value co-creation rather than merely a vehicle for value signalling. Second, it bridges participatory communication theory and marketing-based co-creation literature, integrating process-oriented dialogic principles with outcome-based constructs such as identification, authenticity, and communication effectiveness. Third, it introduces refined conceptual constructs related to communication co-creation quality and student communication citizenship behaviours, contributing new theoretical vocabulary to higher education marketing scholarship.

Practically, the research aims to generate evidence-based guidelines for participatory institutional communication. These guidelines will assist universities in designing engagement platforms that move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward meaningful co-creation. The project also envisions the development of an implementation toolkit for communication offices, including readiness diagnostics, integration protocols for student contributions, and qualitative metrics for evaluating co-created communication outcomes. By articulating the reciprocal benefits of participation, the research encourages institutions to embed communication co-creation within broader student experience and identity strategies.

The originality of the study lies in its systematic integration of online and face-to-face communication co-creation within a single conceptual and empirical framework. While prior studies have examined student engagement, brand co-creation, or pedagogical partnerships independently, this research uniquely foregrounds the communicative dimension of institutional identity construction and examines it across digital and physical contexts simultaneously.

In a higher education landscape characterized by digital transformation, reputational competition, and renewed emphasis on belonging and community-building, understanding how students co-create institutional communication is both theoretically timely and practically significant. By conceptualizing students as strategic partners in institutional storytelling and identity formation, the study contributes to advancing a more inclusive, dialogic, and value-oriented model of university communication.