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INTELIGENCIA ORGANIZACIONAL, COMUNICACIÓN ESTRATÉGICA E INFLUENCIA EN LA SOCIEDAD DIGITAL

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL PURPOSE IN INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITES OF HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS. EVIDENCE FROM PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's organizational landscape, it is widely recognized that strategic goals must be effectively communicated to key stakeholders. However, what is often overlooked is the profound impact of purpose-driven management on everyday organizational behaviour, relationships, products, services, and how stakeholders assess overall performance. This assessment essentially grants legitimacy to organizations, allowing them to thrive in their respective sectors, markets, or institutional environments.

In this evolving landscape, we are witnessing the emergence of hybrid organizations, which are redefining business practices and societal contributions through a clear dedication to purpose-driven strategic decision-making. These hybrid forms may introduce innovative approaches that challenge traditional players in similar sectors and industries.

Consequently, hybrid organizations themselves grapple with the intricate task of reconciling potentially conflicting demands and interests from stakeholders representing multiple sectors and organizational fields.

Given that hybrids face heightened scrutiny and increased demands for transparency and legitimacy due to their multifaceted purposes, they may need to make tailored communication decisions to meet stakeholder expectations effectively.

This study focuses specifically on the phenomenon of hybridization within the Higher Education sector, where private universities as *de jure* and *de facto* hybrid organizations, contend with plural logics and diverse organizational purposes. The author delves into the communicative practices of these institutions, examining whether communication management aligns with their organizational purpose. The particular focus for the empirical work of this present study is on the institutional website as digital communication channel under full ownership, a key digital interface of institutional communication.

1.1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section addresses three primary elements: the growing significance of organizational purpose as a governance mechanism, the pivotal role of strategic communication in upholding organizational purpose, and the emergence of hybridization within the context of Higher Education.

Every organization and institution exist to fulfil specific objectives and cater to the needs and interests of its constituents. The extent to which organizations and their audiences are aware of these objectives hinges on the emphasis, clarity, and intent in communicating and implementing these overarching goals, as well as the scrutiny applied by stakeholders.

As the overarching commitment that underscores all organizational performance, "purpose signifies a dedication to society that encompasses broader objectives and acknowledges the interconnectedness of business and society, as one cannot prosper without the other" (Rey, Velasco, & Almandoz, 2019).

In many instances, organizations publicly declare their mission, often accompanied by a vision and values, forming an inseparable trio. These mission statements are readily available on corporate websites and various communication channels.

Organizational purpose answers the fundamental question of "why" an organization exists, while the mission can be seen as "what" the organization undertakes as its core activities to fulfil that overarching

purpose. The organizational purpose statement does not supplant the mission statement; rather, it reinforces it by linking the mission with the vision and values for a specific period (Araújo, Bezerra, Nóbrega, Neves, & Mendonça, 2020).

Kaplan presents two versions of corporate purpose: instrumental (purpose as a facilitator for cooperative collective action to create value) and moral (involving a prosocial, value-laden endeavour to address tensions and trade-offs between purpose and profits). The latter conceptualization is particularly relevant in the study of hybrid organizations that navigate these tensions (Kaplan, 2023, p. 291).

This perspective aligns with strategic management and communication scholars who emphasize the importance of defining purpose and values collaboratively with stakeholders, not just for them (Fontán, Alloza, and Rey, 2019, p. 110).

The increasing trend of a purpose-driven approach with an emphasis on transparent purpose declarations may have unintended consequences. Some stakeholders, such as employees, shareholders, and consumers, may harbour scepticism regarding the authenticity of companies' proclaimed purposes, suspecting them of engaging in 'purpose-washing' (Gulati, 2022a). Gulati also contends that having purpose and mission statements can be highly effective in guiding decision-making as long as organizations earnestly embed their purpose into their strategy, processes, communications, human resources practices, operational decisions, and even their culture. Organizations that do so are categorized as 'deep purpose' companies. Conversely, the role played by corporate purpose in most organizations may lead to categorizations such as 'convenient purpose' (superficial statements lacking implementation measures), 'disguise purpose' (where words do not align with performance), 'peripheral purpose' (where purpose and corporate social responsibility efforts remain separate), and 'win-win purpose' (society benefits only when profitability is assured) (Gulati, 2022, p. 5-7) (Gulati, 2022b).

Considering the preceding discussion on the significance of organizational purpose for both the organization and its stakeholders, a pertinent

question emerges: What if an organization embraces more than one purpose? This scenario may arise either due to the organization's deliberate choice and open declaration or because of its hybrid nature, operating across multiple sectors or organizational fields.

It is imperative to acknowledge that an organization's corporate purpose extends beyond the mere pursuit of profit; instead, profit should ideally result from the fulfilment of its purpose (Edmans, 2023).

Certain entities, often self-proclaimed as 'purpose-driven organizations,' operate within the business sector. They strive to harmonize the prevailing market-driven logic with a more comprehensive corporate purpose that transcends the sole benefit of shareholders and investors.

In recent decades, various regulatory developments in company law across different countries have facilitated the emergence of corporate purpose theories, particularly in the form of dual-purpose organizations. Examples include Benefit Corporations (B corps) in the United States, governed by explicit declarations of shareholder wealth creation; Società Benefit in Italy, established by the will of partners; and Société à Mission in France (Fleischer, H., 2021).

Scholars examining organizational hybridity have cited B-corps as exemplars of hybrid organizations due to their strong integration of social value and market logic (Battilana et al., 2012; Haigh & Hoffman, 2012). These organizations fall within the realm of hybrid social enterprises (Santos, Pache, & Birkholz, 2015) and attain B-corp status through certification processes. These processes involve transparent communication and prescribed reporting on their pro-social objectives, often aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Barroso, Esparcia, & Ruiz-Mora, 2023).

Hybridization processes introduce new logics into highly institutionalized fields, triggering changes, tensions, and at times, conflicts among organizing principles. Within this dynamic, key actors often engage in a competition for the dominance of their respective logics, leading to an institutional tug-of-war that can extend over a transitional period and ultimately culminate in the emergence of a hybrid version characterized by blended logics.

Hybrid organizations often emerge from the fusion of different institutional logics, such as market-social, public-private, or private-social logics, which are deeply embedded in various institutional sectors (market, state, community, family, religion, education-for-profession, and corporation). These blends result in the creation of new organizational forms through partnerships and combinations.

The coexistence of dual purposes stemming from hybridity necessitates a proactive approach to governance mechanisms beyond traditional board composition and performance evaluation. Purpose serves as a shared sense of identity that transcends different institutional orders and provides a unifying goal for mobilizing diverse means (Wolf & Mair, 2019, pp. 540). A shared purpose can enhance integration and mitigate tensions between competing logics and expectations, thereby meeting the legitimate demands of both internal and external stakeholders (Haigh & Hoffman, 2012). It becomes an invaluable governance tool that unites organizations and their stakeholders, allowing them to collaborate toward common goals, even when employing different means.

Hybrid organizations with dual purposes are increasingly prevalent across sectors such as healthcare, Higher Education, social business, and environmental care. In the context of Higher Education, where universities embody the societal construct of education, hybridization is evident. Private universities, in particular, exhibit pronounced symptoms of conflicting logics, marked by academization, marketization, standardization, and managerialism. These tendencies are more pronounced in private universities, where societal and market logics manifest through mixed governance models and diverse ownership structures, ranging from business groups to non-profit foundations and religious organizations.

If the proliferation of hybrid firms with explicit missions beyond pure profit signifies a more intricate competitive ecosystem (Arya et al., 2019), private universities may indeed disrupt and challenge the Higher Education environment. These private universities, as hybrid institutions blending attributes from the education and business realms, represent a conscious fusion aimed at enhancing both species (Figuerola Herrera, 2016). This amalgamation involves the synergistic

incorporation of business practices and symbols as new organizing principles into educational institutions accountable to private ownership, their internal community, and broader society.

Functioning as hybrids "de facto" and "de jure," private universities have made strategic choices from their inception through selective coupling and pragmatic collaborations. These decisions aim to combine expertise and capabilities, address the unique needs of their institutional stakeholders, and uphold the demands of a university while meeting the expectations of entrepreneurial organizations with distinct organizational purposes (Pache & Santos, 2013; Smets et al., 2015; Skelcher & Smith, 2015; Mair et al., 2015).

Like all hybrid organizations, private universities may grapple with "institutional juggling" between dual logics (Julián Vejar, 2013) and the risk of mission drift. Therefore, their primary objectives include obtaining and sustaining legitimacy while avoiding a shift towards purely business-oriented decisions at the expense of educational and societal goals.

The heightened focus on purpose and the emergence of labels such as 'purpose-driven' or 'organization-with-a-purpose' signal a shift towards a post-industrial management logic where organizational and personal purposes play pivotal roles—the new 'management logic of purpose' (Dijksterhuis, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 1999; Rey et al., 2019).

Hybrid organizations may find themselves pursuing incompatible purposes due to their plural logics. Exposure to multiple institutional logics can create ambiguity among stakeholders regarding which organizational mission or purpose is deemed legitimate, how to pursue this mission, which mission and logics should take precedence, and what constitutes the internal hierarchy of legitimate actions. Consequently, hybrid organizations must unify their goals into a single organizational purpose communicated strategically to all stakeholders.

When integrated into governance and management processes and aligned with the overarching purpose-driven strategy, communication demonstrates an organization's ability to act and communicate strategically.

Existing literature on strategic communication in hybrid organizations provides insights into strong hybrid organizations characterized as innovative, transparent, and capable of generating trust among potentially conflicting stakeholders. They excel in inclusive decision-making, embracing stakeholders' voices, and sustaining hybridity through social negotiation with multiple stakeholders.

Given that "all hybrids need to find ways to deal with the multiple demands to which they are exposed" (Pache & Santos, 2013, p. 972), the role of strategic communication in supporting the most effective hybridization strategy is paramount.

Institutional messages convey institutional logics, and content generators, senders, and receivers all play active roles in the messaging process through embedded agency at individual, organizational, and institutional levels. Crafting purposeful messages is vital to maintaining balance among contents and meanings and avoiding contradictory or confusing messages.

A purpose-oriented approach necessitates strategic and integrated communication that permeates the entire organization, fosters individual engagement, and aligns with the shared organizational purpose, ultimately reinforcing unity (Rey et al., 2019). This requires a strong stakeholder focus and a well-developed communication programme to guide the institution in formulating, deploying, and evaluating its purpose.

Proper communication channels must be established, and internal dialogue promoted to capture the sentiments and thoughts of all stakeholders. Communication is a vital tool for demonstrating that decisions are justifiable when grounded in the declared purpose. Hence, communication is crucial in securing legitimacy and addressing the diverse demands placed on hybrid organizations.

2. AIMS

This study focuses on private universities as the empirical context to illustrate the role of communication in upholding organizational purpose within the challenges of hybridity. These universities face the

additional challenge of a strongly consolidated organizational archetype (state-owned or traditional universities) and 'mandatory' stakeholders, such as faculty, students, and administration, with whom tailored communication management is essential. Some private universities also confront the pressure of carving a good name in a saturated sector where prestigious state-owned institutions have taken the lead for decades or even centuries and both the general public and target audiences scrutinize the newcomer's performance and may consider private education institutions as lucrative enterprises still struggling to achieve the expected academic excellence or making allowances to prospective students in order to boost enrolment and keep the business going. This does not mean that public universities are free from financial pressures, but usually their long-standing reputation and more stable enrolment rates may contribute to a less sales-oriented and market-driven communication focus.

Two research questions (RQ) guide this study:

- RQ1. How do private universities (as hybrid organizations) communicate their organizational purposes in their official websites?
- RQ2. What is the role and status of institutional communication in upholding purpose deployment and addressing multiple stakeholders?

Hypotheses:

- H1. Private universities as hybrid organizations tend to articulate a blended organizational purpose in a single declaration or mission statement addressing multiple stakeholders.
- H2. When organizational purpose and communication are considered strategic elements of governance, the communication function is fully empowered, multi-stakeholder oriented and purpose-driven.

In order to answer these questions and provide empirical evidence, web-based data has been collected by exploring institutional websites.

3. METHODOLOGY

This work is part of a larger multiple case study on purpose-driven strategic communication in hybrid organizations of the Higher Education sector. This paper presents a longitudinal exploratory-descriptive study conducted during 2018-2023 and applies comparative analysis of three private universities situated in Argentina, Lithuania, and Spain. The universities were selected using purposeful and convenience sampling based on shared characteristics, including private ownership, recognized academic excellence (despite being relatively young higher education institutions (less than 100 years since establishment), ranking as top private universities in their respective countries, and with a demonstrated level of institutionalized communication management.

Data collection primarily involved analysing information presented on the universities' official websites, their owned digital media. The institutional webpages were examined and revisited in different periods to track changes. Descriptive content analysis, focusing on publicly accessible web-based information on the internet (Neuendorf, 2016), was applied to understand how these institutions choose to communicate their commitment to strategically identified stakeholders.

The analysis centred on the following aspects:

- How the organizational purpose was portrayed, including the mission statement, its formulation, placement on the website (section, ease of access, prominence, format).
- The institutionalization level of the communication function, including the presence of an integrated ad hoc department, the functions and composition of the communication team, reporting lines (directly to C-suite or a line manager), accessibility of institutional communicators, and specified channels for interaction with stakeholders in the main menu.

To ensure compliance with research ethical standards, maintain the anonymity requested by the institutions (participants in a larger multiple case study) and avoid easy tracking of a particular organization, the three explored universities have been coded as follows: university in

Spain (Case 1) university in Argentina (Case 2), and the one in Lithuania (Case 3). This order matches the level of ‘best practices’ or ‘exemplary case’ regarding the extent to which the explored institutions confirm H2: their communication function is fully empowered, addresses clearly identified key stakeholders and upholds the strategic deployment of organizational purpose.

Additionally, an extensive literature review was conducted to develop the theoretical framework and derive a preliminary typology of hybrid organizations with key features related to strategic communication in the context of hybridity and organizational purpose.

4. RESULTS

Main findings are presented on the basis of the following coding categories for the data collected from the three institutional websites:

- presence of information on organizational or corporate purpose.
- ease of access and visibility of organizational purpose.
- inclusion of the purpose-related messages or sections in other content generated and disseminated through the institutional website.
- identifiable stakeholders to whom the web content is addressed.
- Web 1.0-4.0 tools (presentation-oriented contents, subscription, access to material on the organizational purpose for internal and external users (files to download, deepen, press-room/press-kit); interaction through live chat, sharing and creating content, etc.
- status of the communication function: strategic, tactical, integrated, with sufficient human and technological resources, level of specialization and areas covered, teams that manage it, reporting lines, status and role of the communication manager).

4.1 PRESENCE OF INFORMATION ON ORGANIZATIONAL PURPOSE, EASE OF ACCESS AND VISIBILITY

Analysed data from university Websites show that the three institutions make a clear statement of their mission, visions and values, as was naturally expected from any organization, hybrid or not. The three Webpages have been redesigned and modernized during the last years, which shows tangible investment and efforts to provide a pleasant user experience.

Yet, differences can be noticed in the prominence and visibility granted to organizational purpose/mission and values, as well as in the formulation, style and permanence (unaltered mission since foundation).

The most prominent and easy-to access placement of the mission-vision-values is provided by Case 2. Its Webpage has a much clearer and visitor-friendly display right from the landing page: a top horizontal bar menu offers the very first entry labelled “Institutional”, where Rector’s words make a brief introduction starting with: “We are a university” and describes the institutional identity paraphrasing the text of the mission and values statements. The second label in this “Institutional” menu leads to the statement of mission and values, unaltered since foundation and provides links to videos about the mission, values and vision, with the possibility to download the full pack for future reference and regular use.

In Case 1, the Webpage has been modernized (design, logo colours and style have changed), yet the mission statement remains unaltered. The mission-vision-values statements are placed under the heading “Getting to know the university” (the fifth on the main menu), so it takes some time to find it, but once there the rector’s words elaborate on the key features of a university committed to serve society:

“Learning, living, serving. The University has its own irreplaceable contribution, which requires us to be always and above all university students: reflective people, open to the big questions and to the contribution of all knowledge, committed to the truth wherever it is and wherever it comes from”.

If the organizational purpose is *raison d'être* answering to the question 'why' the organization exists, it is only natural that when an organization is founded, the mission (purpose) and values are quite stable along time and tend to remain the same since foundation.

Both Case 1 (since 1952) and Case 2 (since 1991) have always overtly stated that they are first and foremost a university, with very clear paths in their development and growth and no compromising with their foundational mission, vision and values. The university as a Higher Education is expected to fulfil its triple mission: teaching, research and knowledge transfer. The mission statements of Case 1 and Case 2 state a commitment to serve society through the search and dissemination of truth, to promote **scientific research and welfare activity**; to contribute to the **development of all members in their academic community (students, professors, employees)**. The three pillars of the triple mission are explicitly mentioned; however, this cannot be said of Case 3.

Contrastingly, the newest formulation of the mission statement of Case 3 follows a noticeable business fashion in the choice of words and style. It rather resembles a futuristic vision or desire ("to become one of the top business universities in Northern Europe"), but it does not mention any commitment or promises to any specific stakeholders. Instead, the vision formulation is stated as a mission/purpose of other institutions and mentions "*a community of students, faculty, staff, alumni, businesses partners*" ready to work "*for leaders, executives, entrepreneurs and experts*". This is the youngest of the three examined private universities and it has already reformulated its mission-vision-values three times since its foundation 23 years ago, usually coinciding with the change of rectors. The original text of the foundational mission (no longer retrievable) was totally different and focused mostly on educating business leaders. The second version released in 2018 was formulated in very general and impersonal terms: "*professional and socially responsible development of high relevance managerial competence and economic thought*". Again, the statement differs from the usual purpose declaration in most universities who tend to include key stakeholders (usually students, professors, society or community) and concrete commitments towards them.

Regarding ease of access/visibility in the current Webpage of Case 3, the mission statement can be found only after some navigation effort on the horizontal menu under the heading “About us” and once there the visitor needs to keep scrolling down 3 pages to get to the “mission, strategy and vision”, all presented with a corporate indistinctive style, easily attributable to any other company. The introductory phrases do state that it is an international university, though mainly business and labour market oriented as a

“platform dedicated to high-quality business education for students, current and future leaders, executives, entrepreneurs, experts”. Case 3 continuously emphasizes its business mindset (a business school-university “with extremely close connections to the business world”) and labour-market orientation: “international university that will ensure your future career” (frontpage banner).

4.2. PRESENCE OF PURPOSE-RELATED CONTENTS OR SECTIONS

Signs of less strategically blended multiple purposes (educational, social, for-profit/business logics or market-driven trends) or the adoption of ‘university-enterprise’ managerial approach can also be observed. At first sight and from the information available in three university websites, the most noticeable examples can be found in the Case 3, where the word ‘university’ is gradually less used and more frequently replaced by ‘community of leaders’, ‘platform’ to challenge the present and shape the future, ‘special place’ to start your career, etc.

The terms to denominate the function of communication in Case 1 changed during the observation period. Until 2019 the centralized communication function was under the leadership of a vice-rector for communication with an institutional communication team and communication specialists in each academic unit. In 2020 the centralized communication team was named department of ‘corporate’ (no longer ‘institutional’) communication. And again in 2023 with a new executive board, Case 1 has a department of “Communication Services”. These changes seem to respond to new strategies with each new rector and his/her team. Yet, the institutional values and principles remain intact.

4.3 IDENTIFIED STAKEHOLDERS AND WEB 1.0-4.0 TOOLS.

Institutional Websites may also provide access to pre-established communication lines with key institutional stakeholders (faculty, students and administration staff) as a sign of the participative atmosphere and openness of the institution towards its own community and society at large. Web 2.0 (or 3.0-4.0) tools are not available in the explored cases; the three Webpages still provide Web 1.0 tools (presentation-oriented content viewing services).

Both Case 1 and Case 2 clearly address their key stakeholders: students, professors (academia) and community in their mission/purpose declaration as well as through the inclusion of these stakeholders in the main menu.

Case 1 has a very well- established segmentation of information addressed to different stakeholder groups. Until 2019 it included a personalized search tab on the Homepage with 6 profiles (students, professors and employees, Alumni, parents, prospective students, other visitors). The current version has omitted the last two tabs, and prospective students are not mentioned but addressed by the tab “What do you want to study”, which takes the visitor to a search area about the full academic offer. Meanwhile, the older version of Case 2 Webpage until 2019 displayed tabs for 4 profiles (students, professors, Alumni, prospective students) but in the current version the tab for professors is no longer on the horizontal bar. Instead, all enrolled students, an staff (academic and administrative) have their own intranet link “My X” (the name of the institution).

A previous version of Case 3 Webpage had an only one addressed to prospective students and also a login for members-only access to intranet. In the current version, the menu on the frontpage horizontal bar has no tabs for any specific stakeholders. The webpage is external-user oriented and with a sales and promotion tone, emphasizing academic offer and invitation to apply for studies.

4.4. STATUS OF THE COMMUNICATION FUNCTION

Regarding RQ2 about the role and status of institutional communication in upholding purpose deployment, evidence collected from the Websites has been recorded to demonstrate the status granted to communication management in terms of organizational design, structure, resource allocation and reporting lines.

Case 1 has a very well-established communication department, with a clear internal organization and all the required information (positions, names, email addresses, telephone numbers) for anyone interested in interacting with the institution.

The institutional communication team manages centralized internal, external and digital communication functions with a head for each of these areas, in coordination with communication specialists appointed in each academic unit in charge of the communication function and in direct reporting to the different areas (internal, external, digital).

Case 2 displays some features of institutional communication management like Case 1, with an appointed Director of Communication as head of the department. However, this person is not a full-right member of executive board, and the team is smaller, it does not cover the digital area, presumably left to the autonomous management of each structural unit, though in the Webpage there is no evidence of communication specialists working in each academic unit.

Case 3 does not have a communication department *per se* and there is no mention of institutional communication management neither in the main menu, nor in the other headers. During 2018-2019 there was a ‘Corporate Relations’ director and the marketing director, and both were members of the rectorate, but their functions and areas of work were not described.

The Web-based information reveals that both Case 1 and Case 2 position communication at the highest strategic level. Evidence of this could be seen on the Case 2 Webpage until 2022: the top horizontal bar menu on the landing page starts with the section “Institutional” where the 8th item links to Communication. Visitors could visualize the prominence

and inclusion of communication (with a full-fledged Communication Department operating as a centralized service that covers internal, press relations and social media communication) in the first heading. However, this information was modified in 2023 and the communication service is now under the second subsection “Authorities”, scrolling down after the executive board the list of dean’s offices of all faculties, there comes a section “Institutional Divisions” for all centralized services, including only the name of the Communication Director. Details about the communication team and their specialization areas are no longer available in the Webpage.

In Case 1, under the heading “Getting to know the university”, the third section dedicated to the organization displays the composition of the ordinary governing body of the University called executive council and made up of the President (Rector), who chairs it, the Vice Presidents (vice-rectors), one of them being Vice-rector of Communication and Development. The institutional communication function here is granted the highest strategic status at governance level with the full-right membership in the executive council.

An *ad hoc* qualified communication management unit in direct reporting line with the rectorate showcases Case 1 as an example of best practice, confirming H2. The full support of highest authorities can be inferred by the status and resources granted to the communication function for several decades entrusted to a vice-rectorate for communication with a full-fledged department for centralized functions and appointed delegates in all academic units, with some autonomous Chief Communication Officer (CCO) in larger units. This vice-rectorate has recently been renamed to encompass increasing managerial needs and now it goes under the title of vice-rectorate for communication and institutional development, with a much larger team with very well-distributed subfunctions and areas of communication specializations: contents manager, Web and social media manager, Students Communication, Press relations, Internal Communications, Visuals, etc.

In Case 2, some positive changes have been detected along the observation period (2018-2023) with an increase in the number of communication specialists, areas and services covered at centralized institutional

level. However, the names and positions held by those specialists are no longer available in the current webpage.

Meanwhile, Case 3 has right now the largest marketing and sales department ever since its foundation, with around 20 members solely dedicated to sales for the different study cycles, and 3 employees to communications projects, though no details are provided on the specific communication areas/tasks entrusted to them. On the positive side, Case 3 finally included communication professionals (though always in the sales and marketing team) a couple of years ago.

Evidence related to successfully implemented hybrid governance models to face the hybridity-related challenges can be noted in the composition of all the governance boards of Case 1, from the centralized services (executive council, the highest governing body) to the replicated structure of governance in each rather autonomous unit (schools/faculties, other centres), where the communication function is also structurally and strategically integrated in the hybrid governance teams through an appointed communication manager that reports to the director of development, member of the executive team.

Key results derived from the Web-based data can be summarized as follows:

- H1 is confirmed since the examined institutions declare a blended organizational purpose in their digital platforms and other communication channels as single mission statement of their commitments with specific groups of stakeholders.
- Purpose (mission) has not changed since foundation and is strategically blended, disseminated and integrated as backbone and centre of all decisions (Case 2 and CASE 1).
- The purpose/mission declaration of Case 3 demonstrates a drift from the usual mission statements of universities, as it does not mention the typical stakeholders of Higher Education Institutions and the mandatory areas of activities expected from a university and its triple mission (teaching, research, transfer of knowledge) with a clear social mission towards society.

H2 is confirmed with Case 1 as an example of best practice: the communication function is fully empowered, addresses clearly identified key stakeholders and upholds the strategic deployment of organizational purpose in a hybrid organization through synergetic collaboration of academia and management with mixed governance teams that also include a communication specialist in direct reporting to the Vice-rectorate Communication and Development. This governance mechanism contributes to ensure a shared purpose and its timely and strategic communication at different organizational levels to enhance integration, mitigate tensions between competing logics and expectations, seeking to meet the legitimate demands of internal and external stakeholders.

Case 2 is partially a good example of an institution with a clear mission-driven and purpose-oriented communication management, though status of the communication function is still not fully strategic in terms of resource allocation, involvement of the Director of Communication in the executive board. The current Web-based data shows evidence that the communication team is again media-relations focused on; proofs of communication work in other areas (internal, social media, Alumni, etc) and communication-aided synergy between central services and academic units are not available. From what can be seen on the Webpage of Case 3, it is mostly addressed at external users, web contents are almost 90% self-promotional (academic offer (“Apply for Studies”, enrolment boost, branding (“What makes ‘X’ unique?”), career-making) with little reference to the broader mission of a university: specific social responsibility programmes, knowledge transfer actions. There is no communication department as such, only a marketing team, about which a webpage visitor can get to know only by tiresome browsing around a very long contact list of all staff members.

Communication is a vital tool for demonstrating that decisions are justifiable when grounded in the declared purpose. Hence, communication is crucial in securing legitimacy and addressing the diverse demands placed on hybrid organizations.

Existing literature on strategic communication in hybrid organizations provides insights into strong hybrid organizations characterized as innovative, transparent, and capable of generating trust among potentially

conflicting stakeholders. They excel in inclusive decision-making, embracing stakeholders' voices, and sustaining hybridity through social negotiation with multiple stakeholders.

5. DISCUSSION

There is a stream of research on hybrid organizations within institutional theory (Roundy 2017) and recent contributions on organizational theory, all mostly focused on independent Hybrid organizations, such as social enterprises-SEs (Gehringer, 2021) as the *prime* or *ideal* hybrid form (Wolf and Mair, 2019). Yet, little research has been published on private universities as hybrid organizations per se, though the phenomenon of hybridization in the Higher Education sector has been discussed (Jongbloed, 2015); (Kleinman et al., 2018);(Kleimann, 2019).

Authors of a comprehensive typology of hybrid organizations (Schmitz & Glänzel, 2016) assert that strong hybridity is reflected in *input* (mix of employees and of investors/financial sources), process (democratic principles, stakeholder voice inclusion, etc.) and *output* relations (in-depth reporting blended value creation, search for new indicators of common reporting). Following these indicators, private universities tend to be strong hybrids. However, the role of organizational purpose and strategic communication in relation to managing hybridity remains little explored, except for one conceptual paper whose authors discuss the question of legitimation and claim that “hybrids with several audiences with different expectations are confronted with important concerns because they need to communicate with several audiences simultaneously” (Vakkuri, Johanson, Feng, & Giordano, 2021. p. 253). They do not provide empirical insights on the hybridization phenomena; however, they do set an excellent agenda for further interdisciplinary perspectives on hybrid governance and organizations with “deeper and more nuanced understandings of how hybrids function in the modern world” (op. cit. p. 255).

The role of communication in supporting legitimacy and positive reputation in the eyes of stakeholders has been extensively studied for several decades by many scholars (Hutton et al., 2001);(Patel et al., 2005);

(Drori & Honig, 2013); (Colleoni, 2013) amongst others. Notwithstanding, legitimacy as a key issue for Hybrid organizations has awoken a new interest and some authors have thoroughly examined legitimacy regarding internal stakeholders “through purposeful action and discourse” (van der Steen et al., 2022), with a particular interest in internal legitimacy in a cooperative organization.

The mission/purpose of Higher Education Institutions with clear advocacy for governance by mission specifically in private universities has also been explored (Bermejo Muñoz, 2014); (Rodríguez-Ponce & Pedraja-Rejas, 2015). However, no specific communication management models or empirical insights are provided. Neither are private Higher Education Institutions characterized as hybrid organizations. Similarly, abundant publications illustrate the role of communication as a strategic managerial function that requires institutionalization (Tam et al., 2022); (Werder et al., 2018); (Dozier et al., 2013). Yet, there are no substantial conceptual or empirical studies on communicating plurality of organizational purposes in hybrid organizations.

University online communication has been extensively explored empirically for decades and several studies have been conducted on university websites and universities’ effective social media communication. Scholars contribute useful insights on the active presence of universities in social media and provide recommendations on the strategic use of digital channels (Vega-foelsche, 2020); (Capriotti et al., 2023); (Capriotti & Zeler, 2023).; others describe the use of web tools related to social responsibility contents (Canelón, 2013); (García García et al., 2017). Yet, scarce research has been done on the communication of private universities with a focus on their hybrid nature and the legitimacy demands of multiple organizational purposes.

Further research is needed to delve into how different hybrid organizations signal their distinctive identity, dual purposes and how they position themselves within the two or more competing institutional fields through strategic communication.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study presents has sought to explore how private universities as hybrid organizations communicate their multiple organizational purposes, how purpose is integrated in institutional communication and the status of the communication function as a key to uphold purpose deployment to ensure legitimacy and avoid mission drift.

The current Higher Education context selected for empirical work has largely proven an institutional environment predetermined by the organizational field and at the same time marked by the current demands of competition and urgency to stand out amongst similar institutions.

Private universities categorized as strong hybrid organizations face the challenge of navigating through legitimate prerogatives imposed to a university as a core social agent and market-driven expectations of private ownership.

Managing competing institutional logics and multiple organizational purpose in hybrid organizations (such as private universities) requires a different managerial logic, which also applies to the management of all communicative actions.

The unique contribution of communication in reconciling multiple demands and purposes is usually dependant on the strategic significance assigned to the organizational purpose and to communication being enhanced as an essential managerial function.

Communication should be a strategic managerial function placed at the highest position in the organizational structure as it is vital in aligning multiple institutional pressures, activating favourable behaviours and generating identification and adhesion to the organizational values declared in the organizational purpose.

The findings allow to claim that hybrid organizations tend to blend dual purposes into a single official declaration which addresses their distinctive audiences. This mission/purpose statement should encompass their goals and the values underlying their core activities. However, most hybrids experience tensions and struggle to maintain internal and external cohesion, because the mere communication of the organizational

purpose does not guarantee full identification and implementation by internal stakeholders and approval of other constituents. Thus, continuous monitoring of communication performance under the light of purpose fulfilment can make a significant contribution to avoid the risk of legitimacy deficit, deviation from the foundational mission or even worse, purpose washing.

Strategic communication plays a vital role in ensuring intentional and unequivocal messages tailored for the demands and interests of well-identified stakeholders. In the explored Higher Education context, this is facilitated by synergetic collaboration of academia and management at all levels across the organizational structure through mixed governance teams. Some of the examined private universities have implemented such governance models and empowered communicators to infuse a communicative mind into strategic decisions. Purpose-driven governance in the hands of communication-oriented leaders can equip hybrid organizations to navigate along upcoming challenges.

The present study has explored the phenomenon of organizational purpose and its strategic communication in hybrid organizations, specifically in private universities. Further research could comprise state-owned universities and eventually other organizational fields, such as healthcare, social enterprises, religious organizations.

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