

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA AND THAILAND

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine and compare the public relations communication strategies of Haikou College of Economics (HCE), China, and Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University (RBRU), Thailand, within distinct cultural, policy, and organizational contexts. Findings reveal that HCE prioritizes a digital-first strategic framework, integrating multiple platforms such as its website, WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and offline events. Through narrative-driven content, social listening, and student-generated media, HCE cultivates the image of a “Smart & Innovative Global Campus.” Quantitative outcomes include over 120,000 social media followers, an average Douyin video engagement rate of 22 percent, a 30 percent rise in international student applications within two years, and the launch of an AI-powered chatbot for real-time inquiries. Conversely, RBRU adopts a five-year strategic framework employing an omnichannel approach, positioning its website and news portals as hubs connected to social networks and public platforms (ECP–RBRU). Its communication emphasizes local impact, sustainability, and teacher education. With quarterly KPIs linking visibility, engagement, enrollment, and regional outcomes, RBRU demonstrates excellence in social value and data governance, complementing HCE’s global growth trajectory.

**Keywords:** *Public Relations Communication Strategies, Higher Education, China – Thailand*

## Introduction

In the digital era, in which information technologies and social media have become deeply embedded in everyday life, higher-education institutions across the world are confronted with escalating competitive pressures to attract students, cultivate institutional reputation, and maintain international credibility. Public relations communication is therefore no longer a mere supporting activity but has emerged as a form of strategic communication that decisively shapes the direction of contemporary universities (Chaisook et al., 2023).

Universities in both China and Thailand have sought to refine their communication strategies in ways that reflect their respective national contexts. China has invested heavily in the establishment of internationally competitive universities through initiatives such as Project 985 and the Double First-Class Plan, designed to elevate institutions to world-class status. Thailand, meanwhile, has prioritized the development of regional universities in order to generate social value for local communities, while

simultaneously adapting to the increasingly globalized competition within the higher-education sector (Taweelwong, 2019)

A comparison between the two systems reveals clear divergences arising from differences in structure, culture, and educational policy factors that significantly shape the formulation of public relations strategies in higher education. Julthap and Tansuwannont (2015) argue that the success of university public relations depends on coherent policies, modern communication tools, and sustained networking capacity. Similarly, the framework proposed by Koetsomsri and Phannuen (2019) the “14C Communication Model” offers a contemporary, integrative approach that emphasizes clarity, consistency, appropriate media selection, and collaboration with social influencers as essential components of digital-era public relations.

Accordingly, the present study is significant in that it addresses an important gap in literature. It not only compares the communication strategies employed in China and Thailand but also provides an in-depth analysis of outcomes relating to institutional image, innovation-driven competitiveness, and the social value each country’s universities strive to generate. In doing so, the study elucidates how policy frameworks, cultural orientations, and institutional structures exert direct influence on public relations communication processes within the higher-education sector. Although existing studies on communication strategies span multiple contexts, most remain situated within Thai cultural settings and provide limited insight into the Chinese context particularly concerning the strategic use of Chinese social media platforms by government bodies and local media.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the public relations communication strategies of Haikou College of Economics (HCE) in China and Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University in Thailand.
2. To conduct a comparative analysis of the public relations communication strategies employed by Haikou College of Economics (HCE) in China and Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University in Thailand.

## **Literature Review**

A comparative examination of public relations communication strategies in universities in China and Thailand is essential for understanding the role of communication as a tool for image building and for enhancing the competitiveness of higher-education institutions on the international stage. This study analyzes the similarities and differences in communication approaches within distinct social and cultural contexts, with the aim of developing communication strategies that are both appropriate and sustainable. The details are as follows

### **1. Organizational Communication Theory**

Organizational Communication Theory, often associated with communication management, describes the systematic process of planning, executing, and refining all forms of communication both internal and external in order to achieve shared organizational objectives. Its primary aim is to establish mutual understanding between administrators and personnel, as well as to foster effective communication

with the public (Sothanasathien & Kongwilai, 2007). Communication management is not limited to public relations; rather, it encompasses comprehensive planning, implementation, and evaluation of communication to build relationships with both internal and external stakeholders (Grunig et al., 2002).

This theory also emphasizes the use of information technologies as crucial tools for communication and stresses the need for structured communication channels appropriate to specific contexts for example, the choice of language, modes of contact (face-to-face, written, or digital), scope (internal external), and communication strategies aligned with organizational goals (Yomjinda, 2006). The role of communication managers therefore involves designing communication structures, setting standards, establishing systems for crisis situations, and continuously assessing communication effectiveness so that the organization can operate cohesively and maintain public credibility.

## 2. The 14C Communications Framework for Public Relations

The 14C communication framework serves as a comprehensive model for designing and evaluating effective public relations strategies, with the goal of fostering strong and sustainable relationships between an organization and its publics. The framework comprises fourteen components: Credibility, Context, Content, Clarity, Continuity & Consistency, Channels, Capability of Audience, Consistency with Mission, Creativity, Commitment, Cost, Competition, Cross-cultural Consideration, and Crisis Management (Sothanasathien & Kongwilai, 2007).

Each “C” contributes essential value to communication outcomes. Credibility forms the foundation of public trust in communicated messages. Clarity and Content ensure that messages are easily understood and relevant. Channels and Capability of Audience highlight the need to select media appropriate to the characteristics of target audiences. Continuity & Consistency help sustain a stable institutional image. Meanwhile, Crisis Management and Cross-cultural Consideration are indispensable in a globalized era in which organizations must navigate both crises and sensitive intercultural communication.

Thus, the 14C framework functions not only as a planning tool but also as a systematic approach for quality assessment in organizational communication.

## 3. Corporate Image Theory

Corporate Image Theory explains that an organization’s image is not merely an objective reality, but a composite of factual information and subjective perception deeply rooted in the minds of audiences and often resistant to change. This perceived image may not always align with reality, yet it powerfully influences public attitudes and decision-making behaviours (Kotler, 2000).

Corporate image encompasses beliefs, impressions, and cognitive-emotional responses individuals hold toward an organization, which directly affect behaviours such as trust, loyalty, and service preference. Effective image building therefore requires strategic communication especially through public relations practices that emphasize transparency and alignment with authentic organizational behaviour.

A classic example is Ivy Ledbetter Lee’s transformation of John D. Rockefeller’s public image from that of a ruthless monopolist to a benevolent philanthropist, achieved through communication that reflected his genuine engagement in charitable activities.

Corporate image consists of four interrelated components

1. Perceptual Component, 2. Cognitive Component, 3. Affective Component, and 4. Conative Component.

Sustainable corporate image building thus goes beyond persuasive messaging; it must be grounded in truthful, ethical, and consistent actions reinforced through all communication channels.

#### 4. Concept of Comparison

Within the field of public policy communication, the concept of comparison refers to the analytical process of identifying similarities and differences among systems, mechanisms, or operational models in different contexts. This approach reveals distinctive characteristics, strengths, weaknesses, and transferable lessons, particularly when comparing domestic and international contexts. Comparative analysis helps illuminate how political, social, cultural, and technological factors shape policy communication.

For example, comparing Thailand with developed countries such as the United Kingdom or Canada reveals that these countries maintain professional, institutionalized public communication systems such as the Government Communication Service (GCS) and prioritize two-way, citizen-centred communication. Thailand, by contrast, continues to employ predominantly top-down communication, although efforts to increase public participation have grown in recent years (OECD, 2023).

Comparison also reveals contextual constraints, such as Thailand's centralized political culture and urban–rural disparities in information access, both of which affect the efficacy of policy communication. Hence, the comparative approach does not merely determine which system is “better,” but serves as a tool for developing deep comparative understanding an analytical foundation for designing communication strategies that are contextually appropriate, effective, and sustainable.

#### 5. Social Network Theory

Social Network Theory posits that societies are composed of webs of relationships among individuals or organizations, linked through exchanges of information, resources, or influence. These networks need not possess formal structures; they may emerge organically through real-world interactions or digital platforms. The theory highlights that power and communication are not concentrated in a single centre but are distributed across interconnected nodes whose ties shape the diffusion of information, ideas, and behaviours (Wasserman & Faust, 1994)

In the field of public policy communication, the theory explains that policy is not solely formulated and disseminated through top-down bureaucratic channels; rather, it emerges from interactions among diverse stakeholders within policy networks, including government agencies, citizens, civil society organizations, media actors, and academics. These actors collectively negotiate, influence, and transmit policy messages (Rhodes, 1997)

In the era of social media, Social Network Theory also accounts for connective action, whereby individuals mobilize and coordinate without formal leadership through sharing, tagging, or the use of hashtags reflecting the power of connectivity, a core dimension of social media logic

Thus, Social Network Theory offers a crucial lens for understanding the complex, non-hierarchical dynamics of communication, policy formation, and power in contemporary digitally networked societies.

## **Research Methodology**

In this study, the researcher established the following research procedures.

### **1. Population**

The population in this study comprises individuals involved in public relations and organizational communication at Haikou College of Economics (HCE) and Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University (RBRU), including both policy-level personnel and operational staff. The population also includes relevant stakeholders such as faculty members, students, and external network groups connected to the universities' public relations activities.

### **2. Sample**

The sample for this study is selected through purposive sampling, as follows

2.1 Two executives responsible for organizational communication or public relations from each university.

2.2 Four operational personnel directly responsible for public relations or organizational communication from each university.

2.3 Two faculty members or academic staff associated with public relations activities from each university.

2.4 Five students from each institution who have participated in or been affected by the universities' PR activities.

2.5 Two representatives from alumni, community leaders, or external stakeholders involved in each university's PR activities.

### **Research Instruments**

The researcher employs the following qualitative data-collection instruments

#### **1. In-depth Interview Guide**

A semi-structured interview guide is used with executives, public relations/organizational communication personnel, students, alumni, and other relevant stakeholders. The interview topics encompass PR strategy management, activity design, tool and media selection, communication channels, message content, network building, outcomes, success factors, and encountered obstacles.

The interview guide will undergo content validation by experts in the field

#### **2. Observation Form / Checklist**

This instrument is used to record behaviors, PR activity processes, message presentation styles, and the use of communication channels in both universities. Observations will be conducted during actual events such as university functions, seminars, online/offline PR activities, and interactions on social media platforms. Participation levels, engagement, communication patterns, and audience responses will be systematically documented.

### 3. Document and Media Analysis

A structured form is used to extract data from relevant documents such as PR strategic plans, PR activity reports, organizational manuals, and codes of ethics. Content analysis is then applied to materials obtained from university websites, social media pages, brochures, promotional videos, annual reports, and other related PR media.

### 4. Semi-structured Questionnaire

This tool elicits preliminary data on perceptions, engagement, and evaluations of PR communication and activities. It is used in conjunction with interviews and field observations.

#### Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher adopts the following qualitative data analysis procedures

#### 1. Content Analysis

1.1 Analyze documents, plans, and PR media such as websites, social media platforms, and activity reports from each university.

1.2 Interpret data related to the 14C model of public relations communication, the DMP strategy, or any other PR frameworks manifested in practice.

#### 2. Comparative Case Analysis

2.1 Compare the PR strategies of Haikou College of Economics (HCE) and Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University (RBRU) across policy orientations, operational processes, communication channels, message content, outcomes, and constraints.

2.2 Examine differences arising from cultural contexts, educational systems, and policy environments, and identify factors contributing to success or barriers in each case.

#### 3. Data Validation

3.1 Employ triangulation by comparing data obtained from interviews, documents, PR media, and direct observations.

3.2 In cases of inconsistencies or missing information, conduct follow-up interviews or review additional documents/media.

#### 4. Synthesis and Conclusion

4.1 Synthesize findings from all analytical approaches to develop comprehensive conclusions and practical recommendations.

4.2 Discuss results through a comparative lens and propose strategic directions that universities in each country should adopt, adapt, or avoid.

## Research Results

The findings of this study are presented as follows.

### **Public Relations Strategies of Haikou College of Economics (HCE), China**

HCE employs public relations strategies that highlight its identity as an innovative and internationally oriented university. Key strategic features include

### Digital-First Strategy

Emphasis is placed on digital communication channels, including the official website, major social media platforms (WeChat, Douyin, Weibo, and Facebook), and visually driven media such as infographics and short-form Vlog storytelling. Contents such as Student Success Stories feature narratives of current students and outstanding alumni.

### Integrated Communication

HCE integrates online media, particularly social media and the university website with offline activities such as Open Days, academic seminars, career guidance events, and printed materials. This hybrid approach reinforces both local and international brand visibility.

### Outcome-Driven Approach

HCE systematically employs quantitative metrics, including more than 120,000 social-media followers, high engagement rates, and a more than 30% increase in online applications over the past two years. The university has also succeeded in building an active international student community.

### Engagement and Social Listening

The public relations team provides real-time responses across social platforms, encourages emerging content creators, and organizes short-video competitions to enhance student participation.

### Application of the 14C Framework

HCE's communication strategy aligns with all 14C components clarity, credibility, consistency, continuity, content richness, appropriate tools, strategic tactics, CSR integration, comparative messaging, tangible information, competitiveness, influencer collaboration, and conciseness.

In competitive terms, HCE faces pressure from leading provincial and national universities. As a response, the institution emphasizes technological strengths, employs AI chatbots for automated PR support, and invests in developing a modern PR workforce. International collaborations such as the China–Malaysia International College and joint degree programs with global institutions further reinforce its international recognition and brand credibility.

## **Public Relations Strategies of Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University (RBRU), Thailand**

RBRU positions itself as a university dedicated to local development, with digital and social media serving as core communication mechanisms. The key elements are as follows

### Local Impact and Community Engagement

RBRU's five-year strategic plan highlights research and academic services for local communities. The university supports collaborative activities with local institutions, schools, local government bodies, and regional media partners.

### Omnichannel Communication

RBRU integrates its institutional website, news portals, social media platforms (X, Instagram), and the ECP–RBRU public media center. This omnichannel strategy enhances transparency and strengthens the university's ability to communicate results to stakeholders.

## Content Strategy

The university emphasizes Impact Stories that demonstrate tangible contributions to the community such as digital-skills development projects and research initiatives for sustainable agriculture and eco-tourism. Metrics such as reach, engagement rate, and conversion rates are systematically monitored.

### Three-Pillar Image Positioning

RBRU communicates its identity through three pillars

- (1) a community-centered local university,
- (2) a producer of high-quality, globally competent graduates, and
- (3) a green university.

These messages are conveyed through real narratives and infographic-based communication.

### Engagement and Evidence-Based Communication

RBRU enhances communication efficiency through automated response systems, continuous KPI monitoring, and transparent reporting of community impact. Students and local communities are given channels to express opinions and verify information.

In terms of competitive strategy, RBRU aligns closely with the strategic plans of the Rajabhat University system, conducts quarterly evaluations of communication effectiveness, and adapts content to target audiences. Emphasis is placed on clear storytelling, concise messaging, and easily digestible synthesis of information.

## **Key Comparative Issues China vs. Thailand**

### 1. Communication Objectives

1.1 HCE (China) Builds an image of an innovative, internationally oriented university to attract domestic and international learners and promote academic and career opportunities.

1.2 RBRU (Thailand) Communicates its mission in community development, promotes sustainability, and reinforces its role in producing quality graduates.

### 2. Target Audiences

2.1 HCE (China) Nationwide and international secondary-school students, parents, industry partners, and global academic institutions.

2.2 RBRU (Thailand) Regional students and parents, local media networks, government agencies, and environmentally focused stakeholders.

### 3. Channels and Tools

3.1 HCE (China) Combines multiple digital platforms (WeChat, Douyin, bilingual websites) with offline events and printed media.

3.2 RBRU (Thailand) Employs a full omnichannel ecosystem official website, multi-platform social media, and ECP–RBRU.

### 4. Content and Communication Techniques

4.1 HCE (China) Highlights student/alumni achievements, awards, innovations, and dual-degree programs.

4.2 RBRU (Thailand) Focuses on community impact stories, research outputs, academic services, and public-oriented activities.

#### 5. Outcomes and Indicators

5.1 HCE (China) Strong digital success, with over 120,000 followers, industry-leading engagement, and a 30% growth in international online applications within two years.

5.2 RBRU (Thailand) Evaluates KPIs across digital platforms, events, and funding; converts results into community-impact narratives and student retention indicators.

#### 6. Success Factors and Challenges

6.1 HCE (China) Competition with larger institutions, maintaining cross-platform brand consistency, and developing a modern PR workforce.

6.2 RBRU (Thailand) Balancing local identity with global competitiveness, adapting to digital systems, and maintaining long-term engagement within its networks.

## Conclusion

The comparison reveals that HCE (China) prioritizes digital technologies, agile branding, and international expansion through innovative content and platform-driven communication. In contrast, RBRU (Thailand) emphasizes long-term value creation, sustainability, and community-driven engagement. The application of contemporary frameworks such as the 14C model enables comprehensive and measurable strategic development in university public relations within the digital era.

Overall, higher education institutions in Asia may benefit from adopting the strengths and distinctive strategies of each context to enhance international branding and better respond to the digital lifestyles of the new generation of learners.

Ultimately, this study concludes that the comparison of PR strategies between China and Thailand not only identifies effective techniques and practices but also deepens understanding of the cultural, policy, and organizational factors that influence the success of higher-education communication in cross-national contexts.

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