



Strategic Communication for Institutional Legitimacy, Governance Reform, and Stakeholder Trust in Higher Education Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Development communication plays an important role in shaping inclusive institutional cultures by facilitating dialogue, participatory engagement, and strategic organizational communication within higher education institutions. This study examined how development communication operates as a strategic mechanism for negotiating identity, strengthening institutional legitimacy, and enhancing stakeholder trust among transgender educators in higher education organizations in Metro Cebu. Using a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, the research employed a multiple-case study design involving 25 transgender educators across five universities representing public, private, and faith-oriented institutions. Data were collected through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed five major themes: Legitimacy construction, risk-managed identity strategies, cultural change through identity leadership, stakeholder perception alignment, and governance reform and institutionalization. Results indicate that transgender educators employ communicative practices such as dialogic engagement, pedagogical advocacy, and relational leadership to navigate institutional barriers and influence organizational communication processes that shape institutional culture and stakeholder perception. Despite structural constraints and policy inertia, development communication enables educators to transform marginalization into communicative agency that contributes to governance reform and inclusive institutional practices. The study demonstrates that inclusive communication practices extend beyond interpersonal interaction and play a strategic role in strengthening institutional legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and organizational sustainability. The findings provide managerial and institutional insights for higher education leaders on how strategic communication and inclusive governance practices can enhance institutional credibility and stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: Development Communication, Transgender Educators, Institutional Legitimacy, Inclusive Governance, Higher Education, Leadership Communication, Stakeholder Management

JEL Classifications: M14, I23, D83.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions play a critical role in shaping inclusive societies by facilitating dialogue, social learning, and transformative development processes. Within contemporary organizational environments, communication functions not only as a social interaction mechanism but also as a strategic management process that influences institutional governance, legitimacy, and stakeholder trust. Development communication has therefore

emerged as an important organizational communication approach through which institutions construct legitimacy, promote participatory governance, and align internal and external stakeholder expectations. Through dialogue, inclusivity, and participatory engagement, development communication enables organizations to address complex social issues while strengthening institutional credibility and organizational responsiveness. In educational settings, communication practices influence how diversity, identity, and inclusion are interpreted, institutionalized,

and translated into leadership practices, organizational culture, and governance structures. Consequently, the creation of inclusive academic environments depends not only on formal administrative policies but also on communication systems that cultivate recognition, respect, and collaborative problem-solving within institutional structures (Damante, 2016).

In the context of Philippine higher education, universities operate within socio-cultural milieus shaped by moral codes, religious traditions, and socially constructed norms governing professionalism and identity. Faculty members are expected to exemplify moral authority while concurrently fostering students' intellectual growth and civic engagement. Nonetheless, these expectations frequently generate institutional tensions, particularly for educators whose gender identities contravene traditional cultural frameworks and established professional norms. For transgender faculty, navigating academic environments often necessitates balancing perceived professional credibility with the expression of personal identity, within organizational structures that may lack comprehensive, inclusive communication systems and governance policies. These dynamics exemplify how institutional communication practices influence perceptions of leadership, professional legitimacy, and stakeholders' interpretations of gender diversity within academic settings (Dela Cruz, 2015).

Historically, the teaching profession in the Philippines has been embedded within heteronormative institutional cultures that emphasize conformity, discipline, and respectability as markers of professional credibility. Within such organizational environments, gender-diverse educators often encounter communication barriers that shape how colleagues, administrators, and students interpret their identities and professional roles. These barriers may manifest as subtle exclusion, misrecognition, or self-censorship, which, in turn, influence how educators negotiate visibility and belonging within academic organizations. Empirical studies examining LGBT educators in rural Philippine contexts indicate that discrimination often originates from entrenched cultural beliefs and religious norms that shape institutional discourse and everyday communication practices (Añonuevo et al., 2024). As a result, transgender educators must continually navigate communicative environments in which legitimacy is not automatically granted but is negotiated through professional performance, relational engagement, and institutional interaction (Añonuevo and Digo, 2023).

Globally, research on gender-diverse educators demonstrates that individuals who challenge institutional norms frequently employ adaptive communication strategies to navigate complex organizational environments. These strategies include fostering inclusive learning environments, promoting dialogue about diversity, and maintaining professional excellence to strengthen credibility within institutional structures. Such practices illustrate how development communication can function as a strategic organizational process that contributes to cultural transformation and stakeholder engagement within educational institutions. Through advocacy, mentorship, and inclusive pedagogical approaches, educators convert experiences of marginalization into communicative resources that influence organizational culture and

stakeholder perceptions. In doing so, development communication facilitates institutional learning and strengthens relational trust among academic stakeholders (De Leon and Brunner, 2013). Similar patterns have been documented internationally, in which gender-diverse educators must continually negotiate legitimacy within conservative academic systems that privilege dominant social identities (Auciello, 2016).

Despite growing global recognition of gender diversity, structural protections for LGBT individuals remain limited in the Philippines, particularly within institutional governance frameworks. The absence of comprehensive legal protections, such as the sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) Equality Bill, leaves many educators vulnerable to discrimination and institutional invisibility. In such contexts, the lived experiences of transgender instructors reveal how communication practices, leadership narratives, and institutional policies intersect to shape organizational trust and institutional legitimacy. Higher education institutions, therefore, face increasing pressure to align their communication systems, governance structures, and stakeholder engagement practices with principles of equity and inclusivity. These institutional challenges reflect broader patterns observed across academic organizations worldwide, in which gender-diverse educators must continually negotiate identity, recognition, and professional legitimacy within complex institutional environments (Coon, 2001).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how development communication operates as a strategic organizational communication mechanism through which transgender instructors negotiate identity, institutional legitimacy, and stakeholder engagement within higher education institutions in Metro Cebu. Anchored in a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, the research employs a multiple case study design and reflexive thematic analysis to explore how communicative practices shape professional identity, leadership communication, and governance responsiveness in academic organizations. By documenting the lived experiences of transgender educators, the study highlights how development communication contributes to institutional legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and inclusive governance within higher education systems. The findings contribute to the growing discourse on development communication in organizational and management contexts, particularly regarding stakeholder engagement and institutional credibility in educational institutions. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how participatory dialogue, inclusive leadership communication, and responsive governance practices can strengthen institutional legitimacy and support sustainable organizational transformation in higher education.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aimed to examine how development communication operates as a strategic organizational communication mechanism for negotiating identity, strengthening institutional legitimacy, and enhancing stakeholder trust within higher education organizations. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine how transgender educators negotiate professional identity and institutional legitimacy through communication practices in academic environments.

2. Analyze development communication strategies used by transgender educators to navigate institutional barriers and promote inclusive organizational communication within higher education institutions.
3. Explore how transitioning experiences influence leadership communication, teaching practices, and professional relationships within academic organizations.
4. Identify institutional communication systems and governance-related policy mechanisms that affect transgender inclusion in higher education institutions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Development communication scholarship emphasizes the importance of dialogue, identity recognition, and participatory engagement in shaping inclusive institutional environments. Within organizational contexts, communication functions as a strategic mechanism through which institutions negotiate legitimacy, manage stakeholder relationships, and construct organizational culture. In higher education organizations, communicative spaces influence how educators construct professional identity, negotiate legitimacy, and interact with institutional stakeholders. For LGBT educators, disclosure of gender identity or sexual orientation often involves navigating complex communicative environments where professional visibility intersects with social expectations and institutional norms (Jesus et al., 2025). Authenticity plays an important role in this process because individuals experience psychological well-being when their lived identities align with their professional roles and social interactions. However, educators working in conservative institutional environments frequently encounter tensions between authenticity and institutional expectations, leading them to strategically manage identity expression to maintain professional legitimacy and organizational acceptance (Gan and Chen, 2017).

In the Philippine socio-cultural context, development communication is deeply intertwined with indigenous concepts of relationality and shared humanity that shape collective understanding and social engagement. Filipino cultural philosophies such as *pakikipagkapwa* emphasize empathy, relational dialogue, and recognition of shared human dignity, which serve as important foundations for inclusive communication practices in both educational and social development initiatives. These relational values encourage institutions to cultivate communication environments grounded in compassion, solidarity, and mutual respect among diverse stakeholders (Labor and San Pascual, 2023). Similarly, the concept of *kapwa* highlights interconnectedness and collective responsibility, positioning communication as a relational tool that strengthens social cohesion and ethical engagement within communities. Within organizational settings, such cultural perspectives influence how institutions communicate inclusivity, diversity, and mutual respect among employees and stakeholders. These indigenous frameworks, therefore, provide an important foundation for development communication approaches that promote inclusive organizational culture and stakeholder engagement in Philippine institutions (Pineda, 2022).

Professional development within higher education institutions also plays an important role in shaping inclusive communication environments for educators. Training programs, academic advancement opportunities, and institutional learning spaces enable educators to develop competencies that allow them to navigate diverse classroom and organizational environments. However, professional advancement alone does not guarantee inclusive institutional cultures if governance structures fail to integrate equitable communication practices and supportive institutional policies. Educators' professional growth must therefore be supported by institutional systems that recognize competence, authenticity, and diversity as complementary elements of professional credibility. When institutions cultivate inclusive communication environments that value diversity, educators are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to teaching, scholarship, and organizational engagement. These practices strengthen internal organizational trust while promoting professional collaboration among institutional stakeholders (Sevim and Akin, 2021).

Research on gender-diverse educators worldwide indicates that individuals belonging to sexual minority groups frequently encounter varying degrees of acceptance and resistance within academic institutions. In response, many educators cultivate communicative resilience by fostering inclusive classroom environments, promoting dialogue on diversity, and advocating for marginalized communities (Simons et al., 2021). These practices exemplify how development communication functions as a strategic process that reshapes institutional culture through relational engagement and participatory dialogue. Through mentorship, advocacy, and inclusive pedagogical strategies, educators transform experiences of marginalization into communicative resources that enhance institutional learning and stakeholder engagement. Institutional leadership is crucial in maintaining these initiatives, as governance structures and inclusive leadership practices influence whether communication-driven efforts lead to substantive organizational change. When leaders incorporate inclusive communication strategies into governance frameworks, higher education institutions are better able to strengthen organizational trust and stakeholder confidence (Wright et al., 2019).

Experiences of Filipino educators working in international contexts further illustrate how intercultural communication contributes to inclusive pedagogical practices and professional resilience. Filipino gay teachers working abroad have demonstrated the capacity to adapt to diverse cultural environments while integrating empathy, respect, and inclusivity into their teaching approaches (Jesus and Caumeran, 2026). Such experiences demonstrate how intercultural exposure enhances educators' ability to communicate diversity and foster inclusive learning environments across different educational settings. At the same time, educators continue to encounter challenges in negotiating identity disclosure within institutions where heteronormative expectations remain dominant (Wright and Villafior, 2019). These experiences highlight the importance of communication systems that allow educators to maintain authenticity while preserving professional legitimacy within academic organizations. Effective institutional

communication frameworks, therefore, play an important role in supporting diversity and professional well-being among educators working within global and multicultural educational environments (Woods, 2012).

From an institutional governance perspective, inclusive education is widely recognized as a key principle of sustainable social development. Global human rights frameworks emphasize that educational institutions have a responsibility to ensure equitable participation and protection for individuals regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Within this framework, development communication becomes an important mechanism for aligning institutional policies, governance practices, and stakeholder expectations with principles of inclusivity and equality. Communication processes influence how institutional policies are interpreted, implemented, and communicated to internal and external stakeholders. By promoting dialogue, transparency, and participatory engagement, development communication helps strengthen institutional legitimacy and reinforce stakeholder trust in organizational leadership. Consequently, institutions that adopt inclusive communication policies are better positioned to create safe and equitable environments while strengthening their organizational credibility within broader society (United Nations Human Rights [UNHR], 2019).

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that development communication, cultural relationality, professional development, and governance structures are interconnected elements that influence inclusivity within higher education organizations. Authentic communication practices enable educators to express their identities while maintaining professional credibility and psychological well-being. Cultural philosophies such as *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* provide ethical foundations for inclusive communication and relational engagement within Philippine educational institutions. At the same time, institutional governance frameworks and communication systems play an important role in translating inclusivity initiatives into sustainable organizational practices. These insights highlight how development communication supports institutional legitimacy, strengthens organizational trust, and enhances stakeholder engagement in higher education environments. Consequently, development communication should be understood not only as a social advocacy approach but also as a strategic organizational communication mechanism that contributes to institutional credibility and governance effectiveness.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section describes the research design, study environment, participants and sampling procedures, data collection procedures, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations used to examine the communicative experiences and institutional inclusion of transgender instructors in higher education institutions in Metro Cebu.

3.1. Design

This study employed a multiple-case study design within a qualitative interpretivist paradigm to examine development

communication as a strategic mechanism shaping identity negotiation, legitimacy construction, and stakeholder engagement among transgender instructors in higher education institutions in Metro Cebu. The interpretivist approach was appropriate because it enabled the study to capture participants' meanings, communicative practices, and lived experiences within their specific institutional contexts (Stake, 2006). In particular, the design enabled the researcher to examine how communication processes operate within institutional environments and how educators negotiate professional identity and organizational legitimacy with colleagues, administrators, and students. The multiple-case approach enabled comparison across different higher education settings and facilitated the identification of recurring and divergent communication patterns related to inclusion, legitimacy, and institutional engagement.

3.2. Environment

This study was conducted across five higher education institutions in Metro Cebu, Philippines, representing public, private, and faith-oriented universities. These institutions provided diverse organizational contexts in which communication practices, gender policies, and academic culture intersected. Each university differed in its approach to gender inclusivity, ranging from institutions with more progressive and SOGIESC-sensitive programs to those with limited or cautious engagement in gender-related discourse. The setting reflected the broader Philippine higher education landscape, where institutional communication systems, governance structures, and stakeholder responses continue to evolve in relation to gender diversity (Knutson et al., 2022). These institutional contexts provided an appropriate environment for examining how development communication operates within organizational structures that shape inclusion, legitimacy, and representation.

3.3. Participants and Sampling

The study involved 25 transgender educators, with five participants from each of the five case institutions. Participants included lecturers, coordinators, and administrators, allowing the study to capture varied perspectives on communication, inclusion, and institutional engagement. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals with direct and meaningful experience as transgender professionals in higher education (Creswell and Poth, 2018). To qualify, participants had to (a) self-identify as transgender, (b) currently hold a teaching or administrative role in a higher education institution, and (c) possess at least 2 years of professional experience in their institution. Recruitment was facilitated through academic networks and local support groups connected to gender diversity in academe.

Data were collected through focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. These methods enabled the researcher to examine communicative interactions, narrative framing, and relational dynamics that occur within institutional environments. Focus group discussions allowed participants to collectively reflect on shared communication experiences and stakeholder interactions within their institutions, while individual interviews provided deeper insight into personal communication strategies, identity negotiation, and interactions with institutional

actors, including administrators, colleagues, and students. Through these methods, the study captured both collective and individual perspectives on how communication practices shape institutional inclusion and professional legitimacy.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase process of Braun and Clarke (2021): Familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Interview and focus group transcripts were examined iteratively to identify patterns related to identity negotiation, communication strategies, institutional barriers, and inclusion practices. Particular attention was given to communicative interactions that illustrate how participants engage with institutional stakeholders and navigate organizational discourse.

Manual coding was used to preserve contextual depth and interpretive nuance, while cross-case synthesis enabled comparison of convergent and divergent experiences across the five institutions (Yin, 2018). Through cross-case analysis, the study identified recurring organizational communication patterns that influence how transgender educators negotiate legitimacy, interact with stakeholders, and engage with institutional governance structures. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability through member checking, audit trail documentation, thick description, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This analytic process allowed the study to generate themes that reflect both participants' lived realities and the broader communication dynamics shaping institutional inclusion.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles for research involving human participants, including respect, autonomy, confidentiality, and protection from harm (Israel and Hay, 2006). Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants were provided with informed consent forms explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used, and institutional identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports to protect anonymity. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in private, participant-approved settings to ensure safety and psychological comfort. Because the study addressed sensitive issues related to gender identity and institutional experience, the researcher adopted empathetic listening and trauma-informed interviewing practices to prioritize participants' well-being throughout the research process.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Case 1: The Resilient Educator

For transgender instructors navigating higher education institutions, professional visibility is largely shaped through communicative interactions that influence recognition, legitimacy, and inclusion within academic spaces. The case illustrates that identity negotiation occurs through everyday communication

practices in which educators balance authenticity with institutional expectations. One participant explained, *"Every day in the university feels like I have to prove that I deserve to be here, not just because of my credentials, but because of who I am."* This reflection highlights how professional identity is constructed through communicative engagement within institutional cultures where academic legitimacy is continuously negotiated (Kayas et al., 2024). The participant's narrative further revealed how communication practices can simultaneously acknowledge professional competence while marginalizing personal identity, particularly when she shared, *"Even during meetings, some still use my old name—it feels like I'm visible for my work but invisible for who I truly am."* Such experiences demonstrate how institutional discourse and everyday communication interactions shape the boundaries of belonging in academic environments (Nordbäck et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, the participant reframed exclusion as communicative agency, transforming personal experiences into advocacy-oriented dialogue within the institution. She emphasized, *"I turned my frustrations into programs that advocate for gender inclusion; it's exhausting but fulfilling to see small changes happen."* This illustrates how development communication operates through participatory engagement and advocacy initiatives that gradually influence institutional awareness and cultural attitudes. Through dialogue, program initiatives, and inclusive communication practices, transgender educators become active agents of social change within academic organizations. Their communicative resilience not only challenges exclusionary norms but also contributes to the gradual transformation of institutional discourse toward greater inclusivity and stakeholder understanding.

4.2. Case 2: The Silent Innovator

For transgender instructors working within conservative or faith-oriented higher education institutions, communicative expression is often shaped by institutional norms that implicitly reinforce cisnormative expectations. In such environments, educators must carefully manage how identity is communicated across different academic spaces, balancing authenticity with professional legitimacy. One participant explained, *"In my classroom, I can be myself, but outside, I constantly calculate what version of me is acceptable."* This account highlights how communication becomes a strategic process through which transgender educators negotiate visibility and recognition within institutional contexts. Such experiences reflect how institutional structures and everyday discourse can reproduce subtle forms of trans exclusion within academic environments (Maughan et al., 2022).

The participant further described how silence functions as a deliberate communication strategy rather than passive withdrawal. She noted, *"I let my work speak for me; I publish, I perform, and I serve—because proving my worth feels safer than asserting my identity."* In this context, professional output becomes a communicative resource that signals competence and credibility within organizational settings where identity disclosure may generate vulnerability. These dynamics illustrate how institutional cultures often privilege dominant gender norms, limiting the

communicative space available for transgender educators within academic discourse (Tudisco, 2023).

Despite these constraints, the participant described using pedagogy as a subtle yet powerful form of development communication. She shared, *“I integrate discussions on respect and empathy without naming them as gender topics—it’s my quiet rebellion.”* Through classroom dialogue, curriculum framing, and relational teaching practices, the educator promotes inclusivity while minimizing institutional resistance. This approach demonstrates how development communication can operate through indirect and dialogic pedagogical practices that gradually reshape perspectives within academic communities. By embedding values of empathy and respect into everyday teaching interactions, transgender educators contribute to incremental transformations in institutional culture and stakeholder understanding.

4.3. Case 3: The Transitional Mentor

For transgender educators undergoing gender transition while actively teaching, the academic environment becomes a communicative space where identity, visibility, and belonging are continuously negotiated. The transition process often unfolds publicly within institutional settings, transforming everyday academic interactions into opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and relational learning. One participant shared, *“Transitioning in the same university where I teach meant being observed, evaluated, and sometimes misunderstood—but I refused to disappear.”* This account illustrates how communicative visibility becomes both a challenge and a strategy for asserting presence within academic systems that were not originally structured to accommodate gender diversity (Goldberg et al., 2022).

The participant further explained how institutional procedures complicated the communication of identity within administrative systems. She noted, *“It took months before my name and gender marker were corrected in HR, and every delay reminded me that paperwork defines legitimacy more than identity.”* Such experiences demonstrate how bureaucratic communication processes can shape recognition and belonging within higher education organizations. Administrative documentation and procedural language often serve as gatekeeping mechanisms that shape how individuals are acknowledged within institutional discourse.

Despite these barriers, the educator transformed the transition into a pedagogical and communicative opportunity that encouraged dialogue on authenticity and inclusion. She reflected, *“When students saw my courage to live authentically, they began discussing inclusion in ways no lecture could achieve.”* Through classroom interaction, mentorship, and open communication, the educator facilitated conversations that encouraged empathy, understanding, and critical reflection among students. This experience reflects the importance of relational affirmation and supportive communication networks that strengthen resilience and belonging within educational communities (Vance Jr. et al., 2024). By turning personal transition into mentorship and dialogue, the educator demonstrated how development communication can transform lived experience into a meaningful catalyst for

learning, inclusion, and cultural awareness within higher education institutions.

4.4. Case 4: The Cultural Advocate

For transgender educators whose work extends beyond classroom teaching into community engagement and institutional outreach, communication becomes a central mechanism for promoting dialogue, understanding, and inclusion. Through interaction with students, community members, and institutional stakeholders, educators often function as communicators of social awareness and cultural change. One participant reflected, *“When I go into communities, I am not just representing my subject or my university—I am representing what it means to exist beyond the binary.”* This statement highlights how visibility itself becomes a communicative act that influences how gender diversity is understood within both academic and community contexts. Such experiences illustrate how transgender educators often assume informal advocacy roles in environments where institutional systems are still adjusting to gender inclusivity (Knutson et al., 2022).

The participant also described how institutional communication surrounding transgender identity can reflect both recognition and hesitation. She noted, *“Students see me as a role model, but some administrators still introduce me cautiously, as if my identity needs justification.”* This observation reveals the ambivalence that can exist within institutional discourse, where expressions of inclusion may coexist with uncertainty or discomfort in everyday communication practices. Such dynamics mirror broader patterns in educational institutions where transgender visibility is acknowledged but not always fully integrated into formal policies or organizational culture (Martino et al., 2022).

Despite these tensions, the educator reframed outreach activities as opportunities for development communication through dialogue and relational engagement. She explained, *“Engagement with local leaders became my classroom—it’s where I teach understanding through presence, not confrontation.”* Through community dialogue, educational discussions, and collaborative engagement, the participant promoted empathy and awareness without resorting to confrontational advocacy. This approach demonstrates how development communication can operate through relational pedagogy and everyday engagement, gradually shaping cultural understanding within academic and community spaces. By embodying professionalism, empathy, and authentic representation, the educator contributes to the normalization of gender inclusivity while strengthening trust and dialogue among diverse stakeholders.

4.5. Case 5: The Policy Reformer

For transgender administrators in higher education, leadership involves not only managing academic operations but also shaping institutional dialogue around inclusion and representation. In administrative roles, communication becomes a strategic tool for advocating policy reform, facilitating stakeholder dialogue, and promoting a more inclusive institutional culture. One participant shared, *“My position allows me to draft inclusive policies, but it also means I’m constantly pushing against walls built long*

before I arrived.” This reflection illustrates how institutional communication and governance structures can influence the progress of gender-inclusive initiatives within academic organizations. Such challenges reflect broader patterns in educational institutions where policy debates surrounding gender inclusion remain politically sensitive and structurally complex (McQuillan et al., 2024).

The participant further described how institutional decision-making processes often slow the implementation of inclusive policies. She explained, “Colleagues support the idea of equality until it reaches the level of implementation—then they call for more consultations, more time, more caution.” These delays reveal how bureaucratic communication processes can unintentionally sustain exclusion by postponing concrete action. Such patterns mirror findings that institutional hesitation and procedural delays may function as indirect forms of policy resistance within educational governance systems (McQuillan, 2022).

Despite these constraints, the educator continued to use leadership communication to reshape institutional discourse toward empathy, evidence, and inclusion. She emphasized, “Policy is not just paperwork—it’s a declaration that people like me belong here.” Through sustained dialogue with administrators, faculty members, and institutional committees, the participant advocated for gender-inclusive language guidelines and pronoun recognition policies. These initiatives served not only as administrative reforms but also as communicative signals that affirm belonging within the institution. By transforming policy discussions into spaces for dialogue and reflection, the educator demonstrated how development communication can influence governance processes and promote inclusive organizational change within higher education institutions.

As shown in Table 1, the progression of themes illustrates how development communication operates as a strategic mechanism

within higher education organizations. The early themes foreground communicative practices that construct institutional legitimacy through professional positioning and adaptive identity strategies. The intermediate themes demonstrate how identity leadership and stakeholder-oriented messaging facilitate cultural change and align perceptions across diverse publics. Finally, the latter themes emphasize governance reform and institutionalization, revealing how communication extends beyond interpersonal interaction to shape policy structures and organizational trust. Collectively, the themes map a developmental trajectory from micro-level communicative agency to macro-level institutional transformation.

4.5.1. Theme 1: Legitimacy construction

Transgender instructors in higher education operate within institutional environments where legitimacy is not automatically conferred but communicatively constructed. Their narratives reveal that visibility is negotiated within organizational structures shaped by heteronormative norms and implicit professional expectations. Recognition in academe emerges as conditional—often contingent upon demonstrable productivity, scholarly output, and institutional contribution rather than inclusive affirmation of identity. As one participant expressed, “Every day in the university feels like I have to prove that I deserve to be here, not just because of my credentials, but because of who I am.” This account illustrates how professional competence becomes a strategic communicative resource through which marginalized educators assert belonging and counter symbolic exclusion. Rather than relying solely on formal credentials, participants engaged in what may be conceptualized as legitimacy performance—deploying excellence, visibility in development discourse, and sustained institutional engagement to secure recognition within organizational hierarchies. In this sense, development communication functions not merely as interpersonal expression but as an embedded organizational mechanism that shapes institutional legitimacy and professional authority.

4.5.1.1. Professional positioning in development discourse

Professional positioning emerged as a strategic communicative practice through which transgender educators negotiated institutional legitimacy within higher education organizations. Participants described academic excellence not merely as personal achievement but as a deliberate mechanism to counter marginalization and secure organizational credibility. As one educator reflected, “I learned to let my work speak before people question my worth.” This statement illustrates how meritocratic performance becomes a form of legitimacy signaling, in which scholarly productivity and institutional contributions function as communicative capital in environments shaped by normative bias. Competence, therefore, operates simultaneously as protective armor and symbolic assertion—demonstrating that professional authority transcends gender identity (Felix et al., 2022). By consistently demonstrating excellence, transgender educators redefine organizational narratives about capability and belonging, thereby subtly influencing peer perceptions and institutional expectations. In this context, development communication transcends mere advocacy rhetoric; it is exemplified by ongoing professional engagement that rebuilds legitimacy through tangible contributions, active participation in discourse, and institutional impact.

Table 1: Core themes and sub-themes

Core themes	Sub-themes
T1 Legitimacy construction	Professional positioning in development discourse Barriers to inclusive communication Agency-building and social change communication
T2 Risk-managed identity strategy	Protective communication practice Curriculum as a development communication tool Reframing institutional communication norms
T3 Cultural change through identity leadership	Institutional communication gaps Identity communication and narrative change Participatory communication and support systems
T4 Stakeholder perception alignment	Public communication and development messaging Negotiated communication in diverse publics Transformative and dialogic communication
T5 Governance reform and institutionalization	Policy communication barriers Leadership communication for development Communication for institutional change and advocacy

4.5.1.2. Barriers to inclusive communication

Despite demonstrable professional competence, participants reported persistent communicative barriers that constrained full institutional inclusion. Experiences of misgendering, social avoidance, and symbolic tokenism were not isolated incidents but recurring practices embedded within everyday organizational interactions. As one instructor explained, *“Even during meetings, some still use my old name—it feels like I’m visible for my work but invisible for who I truly am.”* This account reflects a form of symbolic erasure, where institutional acknowledgment of performance coexists with communicative invalidation of identity. Such micro-level interactions expose a structural disjuncture between formal inclusivity rhetoric and enacted communication practices within higher education organizations. The persistence of these communicative gaps indicates that legitimacy remains conditional and precarious, mediated through informal norms and implicit bias rather than institutionalized equity mechanisms (Latupeirissa et al., 2024). From a development communication perspective, these barriers reveal how organizational cultures reproduce exclusion through language, interactional routines, and administrative practices, thereby undermining stakeholder trust and weakening the coherence of governance reform initiatives.

4.5.1.3. Agency-building and social change communication

Rather than internalizing exclusion, participants described deliberate efforts to convert marginalization into communicative agency. Advocacy emerged not as reactive resistance but as a strategic intervention embedded within institutional structures. As one educator articulated, *“I turned my frustrations into projects that make inclusion part of our daily conversations.”* This statement illustrates how lived marginality becomes a catalyst for development-oriented communication practices that normalize inclusion through sustained dialogue, program design, and mentorship. Agency in this context is not merely personal resilience; it represents a shift from individual survival to collective transformation, where communicative initiatives reshape institutional discourse and expand the boundaries of belonging. Through gender-sensitive programs, curricular integration, and peer mentoring, transgender educators reposition themselves as agents of organizational learning and cultural recalibration. Consequently, development communication operates as a vehicle for social change within higher education organizations, translating personal experience into institutional innovation that strengthens legitimacy, reinforces stakeholder trust, and advances governance reform through participatory engagement.

4.5.2. Theme 2: Risk-managed identity strategy

For transgender instructors working within conservative or faith-oriented higher education institutions, silence emerges as a calculated communicative strategy rather than passive withdrawal. Participants described navigating organizational environments where overt expressions of gender diversity may provoke scrutiny, professional vulnerability, or reputational exposure, thereby necessitating deliberate calibration of visibility and response. As one educator reflected, *“Silence is not surrender—it’s strategy. I know when the system is not ready to hear me.”* This articulation positions silence as strategic identity risk management, through which educators safeguard institutional credibility while sustaining

personal authenticity within normatively constrained structures. Rather than signaling acquiescence, such discretion represents adaptive communicative agency embedded in organizational systems governed by implicit cultural expectations. Through selective engagement and restrained positioning, transgender instructors negotiate legitimacy while reducing relational friction, enabling development communication to function incrementally within resistant institutional cultures. In this sense, silence operates simultaneously as protective and transformative—preserving professional continuity, subtly advancing cultural recalibration, and sustaining stakeholder confidence.

4.5.2.1. Protective communication practice

Protective communication practices emerged as mechanisms through which transgender educators secured psychological safety and professional continuity within environments where heightened visibility could provoke scrutiny or relational tension. Silence was not described as withdrawal but as a deliberate stabilizing strategy that allowed instructors to manage institutional risk while preserving pedagogical authority. As one participant explained, *“In my classroom, I can be myself, but outside it, I have to measure every word because not everyone understands or accepts.”* This reflection illustrates how communicative restraint operates as a boundary-management practice, enabling educators to differentiate between affirming and potentially hostile organizational spaces. Rather than diminishing authenticity, such calibrated communication sustains professional credibility and minimizes exposure to implicit bias embedded in institutional culture (Jaime et al., 2023). Within this context, development communication functions through selective engagement, allowing transgender instructors to maintain instructional effectiveness while navigating evolving organizational norms. Protective silence, therefore, becomes a strategic resource that safeguards legitimacy and ensures continued participation in institutional life without immediate confrontation.

4.5.2.2. Curriculum as a development communication tool

Curriculum integration emerged as a strategic form of development communication through which transgender educators advanced inclusivity without directly confronting institutions. Rather than positioning advocacy as explicit identity discourse, participants described embedding principles of empathy, respect, and diversity within pedagogical content and classroom interaction. As one educator explained, *“I integrate respect, empathy, and diversity into my lessons without naming them as gender issues—it’s my quiet rebellion.”* This approach reflects a deliberate communicative reframing in which the curriculum becomes a medium for normative transformation rather than ideological declaration. By situating inclusivity within everyday teaching practices, educators normalize equity through relational engagement and dialogic learning, thereby reshaping cultural assumptions at the micro-level of instruction (Catacutan et al., 2023). In this sense, development communication operates pedagogically—cultivating stakeholder awareness and moral reflection through sustained educational exposure. Such subtle curricular interventions contribute to long-term institutional legitimacy by aligning classroom discourse with evolving social values while maintaining professional credibility within structured academic environments.

4.5.2.3. Reframing institutional communication norms

Within rigid higher education institutions, professionalism is frequently constructed through implicit cisnormative standards that equate credibility with gender conformity. Participants described actively contesting these communicative norms by embodying both professional excellence and authentic identity within structured organizational spaces. As one educator articulated, *“Professionalism for me is not hiding who I am—it’s doing my job well despite the bias around me.”* These reframing positions professionalism not as compliance with dominant expectations but as a communicative act of reclamation, where competence and authenticity coexist as mutually reinforcing attributes. Through sustained composure, integrity, and instructional mastery, transgender instructors disrupt narrow institutional definitions of legitimacy and redefine credibility beyond gendered assumptions (Weder, 2022). In this context, development communication functions as normative recalibration—reshaping organizational discourse through embodied practice rather than formal declaration. Such performative authenticity gradually reconstructs institutional expectations, aligning culture and reinforcing stakeholder confidence in inclusive academic professionalism.

4.5.3. Theme 3: Cultural change through identity leadership

For transgender educators who undergo gender transition while actively teaching, the process extends beyond personal transformation and assumes the character of pedagogical praxis embedded within institutional life. Participants described transition not merely as identity affirmation but as an embodied communicative act that intertwines resilience, visibility, and instructional leadership. As one educator reflected, *“My transition happened in front of my students, and it became the most powerful lesson I never formally taught.”* This articulation reframes transition as experiential pedagogy, where authenticity becomes a medium of development communication that cultivates empathy, critical awareness, and relational understanding. Navigating administrative systems and classroom dynamics simultaneously, transitioning educators’ model integrative leadership by demonstrating that vulnerability and professional authority can coexist within structured academic environments. Through this lived curriculum, personal identity becomes a site of collective learning, transforming individual struggle into dialogic engagement that incrementally reshapes institutional culture. In this sense, development communication operates through embodied presence, advancing cultural recalibration while sustaining professional legitimacy and reinforcing stakeholder trust.

4.5.3.1. Institutional communication gaps

Institutional communication gaps surfaced as structural barriers embedded within administrative and documentation systems that failed to align with lived identity realities. Participants described bureaucratic processes—particularly those related to human resource records and official documentation—as sites where inclusion rhetoric fragmented into procedural rigidity. As one educator recounted, *“It took months before my name and gender marker were corrected in HR, and every memo felt like a reminder that I didn’t belong.”* This experience illustrates how administrative communication operates as a mechanism of symbolic validation or exclusion, where delayed recognition undermines institutional

legitimacy and erodes relational trust. Rather than merely technical inefficiencies, these gaps reflect deeper organizational misalignments between governance structures and evolving social norms. Within this context, development communication is constrained by formal systems that privilege documentation over identity, revealing how procedural inertia can reproduce marginalization despite progressive discourse. Addressing such communication gaps, therefore, requires not only policy revision but structural recalibration to ensure that institutional processes affirm rather than invalidate stakeholder identity.

4.5.3.2. Identity communication and narrative change

Despite structural constraints, participants described transforming personal visibility into a catalyst for narrative change within the classroom. Transitioning was not framed solely as identity affirmation but as a communicative intervention that reoriented student discourse toward empathy, dignity, and relational understanding. As one educator reflected, *“My students saw me change, and it opened conversations about identity, respect, and humanity that no textbook could teach.”* This account illustrates how embodied authenticity functions as development communication in practice, generating dialogic spaces where lived experience reshapes dominant narratives about gender and professionalism. Rather than relying on abstract instruction, educators enacted inclusivity through presence, allowing students to encounter diversity as a lived, relational reality (Fairchild and Arrington, 2023). In doing so, identity communication becomes pedagogical praxis—where authenticity serves as both message and medium, facilitating cognitive and affective transformation within academic settings. Such narrative recalibration contributes to cultural adaptation within higher education organizations by aligning institutional discourse with evolving norms of equity and respect.

4.5.3.3. Participatory communication and support systems

Participatory communication and relational support networks emerged as critical mechanisms sustaining the well-being and professional continuity of transitioning educators. Participants emphasized that affirmation is not solely derived from formal institutional policies but is co-constructed through everyday interactions with students and colleagues. As one instructor expressed, *“My students became my strength; their respect reminded me why authenticity matters.”* This articulation highlights how participatory engagement generates emotional reinforcement and relational legitimacy within academic spaces. Supportive networks function as communicative ecosystems that counterbalance structural exclusion by fostering a sense of belonging through dialogue, mutual recognition, and shared learning. Within this context, development communication operates relationally, cultivating solidarity that mitigates institutional rigidity and strengthens stakeholder cohesion. Such community-based affirmation contributes to incremental cultural adaptation by embedding inclusion within lived interaction rather than relying exclusively on top-down reform.

4.5.4. Theme 4: Stakeholder perception alignment

For many transgender educators, advocacy extends beyond the classroom and becomes an integral dimension of their professional

and personal identity. Participants described engaging with communities, institutional partners, and local networks as forms of development communication that shape how inclusion is understood and enacted across diverse publics. As one educator stated, *“When I represent the university in community programs, I know people are not just listening to my topic—they are observing what inclusion looks like in practice.”* This reflection underscores how visibility functions as stakeholder-perception work, in which embodied presence influences attitudes toward gender diversity and institutional credibility. Through relational engagement, empathy, and sustained dialogue, transgender instructors bridge the gap between formal policy rhetoric and lived institutional practice. Advocacy thus operates as communicative alignment—recalibrating public understanding while reinforcing trust in higher education organizations as inclusive spaces. In this sense, development communication extends into broader social ecosystems, where everyday interaction becomes a strategic medium for shaping stakeholder confidence and cultural acceptance.

4.5.4.1. Public communication and development messaging

Public communication emerged as a significant extension of development messaging beyond institutional boundaries, particularly through outreach programs, seminars, and community partnerships. Participants described these engagements as spaces where representation required careful negotiation, as visibility simultaneously generated influence and exposure. As one educator reflected, *“When I visit communities, I know I’m not just representing my subject—I’m representing what it means to live authentically.”* This statement illustrates how public presence functions as a communicative intervention, where identity and professionalism intersect to shape broader social perceptions. Through sustained engagement in external forums, transgender instructors contribute to the normalization of gender inclusivity by embodying competence and authenticity within civic and institutional dialogues. Public messaging, therefore, operates not as abstract advocacy but as relational development communication that recalibrates community understanding through lived demonstration. In doing so, educators reinforce institutional credibility while expanding stakeholder awareness across diverse social contexts.

4.5.4.2. Negotiated communication in diverse publics

Negotiated communication emerged as a recurring dynamic among students, community, and institutional actors, in which openness coexisted with cautious institutional reception. Participants described a dual reality in which rhetorical endorsement of inclusion did not always translate into consistent administrative practice. As one educator observed, *“Students look up to me as a role model, but some administrators still introduce me hesitantly, as if my identity needs an explanation.”* This articulation highlights the tension between progressive discourse and institutional comfort thresholds, revealing how symbolic support may remain procedurally restrained. Transgender educators, therefore, engage in continuous interpretive work—adapting communicative strategies according to audience, context, and perceived organizational readiness. Such negotiation reflects development communication in action, where relational sensitivity

becomes essential to sustaining legitimacy while navigating uneven institutional commitment (Manreal et al., 2025; Yudarwati and Gregory, 2022). In this sense, stakeholder alignment is not static but incrementally constructed through context-responsive engagement within diverse publics.

4.5.4.3. Transformative and dialogic communication

Transformative communication was frequently described as relational rather than confrontational, rooted in dialogue rather than formal activism. Participants emphasized that advocacy unfolded through everyday interactions that prioritized empathy, listening, and shared understanding. As one instructor expressed, *“Engaging with people became my classroom; I teach understanding not through debate, but through empathy.”* This perspective reframes advocacy as dialogic development communication, where meaning is co-constructed through sustained relational presence. By centering empathy and narrative exchange, transgender educators cultivate human connections that disrupt prejudice without escalating institutional defensiveness. Such dialogic engagement transforms advocacy into a lived ethic, extending pedagogical influence beyond formal instruction into broader social encounters (Martínez, 2025). Through relational consistency and embodied integrity, transformative communication gradually reshapes cultural perceptions while reinforcing institutional credibility and stakeholder trust.

4.5.5. Theme 5: Governance reform and institutionalization

Transgender educators who occupy leadership or administrative positions often carry the dual responsibility of managing academic operations while advancing inclusive reform within institutional structures. Participants described navigating the tension between progressive discourse and organizational inertia, where formal endorsement of equality does not always translate into sustained policy implementation. As one administrator reflected, *“Policy change is not just about drafting new guidelines—it’s about convincing the institution that inclusion is part of its long-term identity.”* This articulation underscores how governance reform operates as a communicative process, requiring negotiation, persuasion, and strategic alignment across institutional actors. Rather than approaching reform as isolated advocacy, these leaders embed development communication within administrative systems—translating lived experience into policy dialogue, procedural recalibration, and organizational learning. Institutionalization thus becomes a gradual process of aligning formal structures with inclusive values, ensuring that recognition moves beyond rhetoric into operational practice. In this sense, governance reform reflects the maturation of development communication—from interpersonal engagement to structural embedding that reinforces legitimacy and strengthens stakeholder trust.

4.5.5.1. Policy communication barriers

Policy communication barriers emerged as structural impediments within institutional governance processes, where inclusive proposals were frequently delayed, diluted, or procedurally deferred. Participants described how rhetorical endorsement of equality often fragmented at the implementation stage, revealing a gap between symbolic agreement and operational commitment.

As one administrator noted, “*Colleagues agree in principle, but when it’s time to approve the policy, suddenly there’s a call for another review or consultation—it’s a delay disguised as diplomacy.*” This articulation highlights how bureaucratic caution can function as communicative avoidance, subtly sustaining exclusion without overt rejection. Such patterns demonstrate that resistance is often embedded within procedural routines rather than explicit opposition, complicating efforts toward trans-affirmative governance (Marie, 2025). From a development communication perspective, these barriers reflect institutional reluctance to recalibrate normative structures, thereby constraining legitimacy-building initiatives. Addressing such impediments requires strategic alignment between discourse, policy drafting, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that inclusive commitments translate into enacted reform.

4.5.5.2. Leadership communication for development

Leadership communication for development surfaced as a critical mechanism through which transgender administrators advanced inclusive reform despite institutional resistance. Participants emphasized that authority must be exercised relationally—balancing diplomacy with principled advocacy to foster gradual organizational change. As one leader reflected, “*I’ve learned that leadership means creating space even when the doors are closed.*” This statement underscores how inclusive leadership operates communicatively, shaping institutional climate through consistent presence, moral clarity, and dialogic engagement. Rather than relying solely on positional power, these administrators humanize governance by embedding empathy and lived experience into policy deliberations. Such leadership reframes reform as a participatory process, where trust-building and sustained dialogue strengthen stakeholder confidence in institutional transformation. In this sense, development communication becomes a leadership practice that aligns ethical conviction with structural adaptation.

4.5.5.3. Communication for institutional change and advocacy

Communication for institutional change was described as a deliberate shift from symbolic affirmation to structural embedding of inclusive practices. Participants emphasized that sustainable reform requires grounding advocacy in research, data, and

documented outcomes to ensure organizational accountability. As one administrator stated, “*Policy has to go beyond slogans; we need evidence that inclusion improves both academic performance and campus climate.*” This perspective positions development communication as evidence-informed advocacy, where scholarship and lived experience converge to legitimize structural reform. By translating inclusive discourse into measurable frameworks and administrative procedures, leaders institutionalize belonging within governance systems. Such efforts move inclusion from event-based recognition to operational integration, reinforcing legitimacy and strengthening stakeholder trust. Institutional change, therefore, reflects the culmination of communicative action—where dialogue, research, and policy converge to embed equity as an enduring organizational norm.

As shown in Table 2, foundational sub-themes such as professional positioning, inclusive communication, and agency-building were consistently observed across all cases, whereas institutional communication gaps and policy barriers were more prominent among participants occupying leadership and administrative roles (Cases 3-5). This distribution reveals a developmental continuum in which communicative practices evolve from micro-level identity negotiation to macro-level governance reform. From an Institutional Theory perspective, these patterns illustrate how organizational actors respond to normative pressures embedded within heteronormative academic structures. Simultaneously, from a Stakeholder Theory lens, the findings demonstrate that legitimacy is not passively granted but actively constructed through communicative alignment with internal and external stakeholder expectations. Development communication, therefore, functions not merely as a social-change discourse but also as a strategic organizational mechanism that shapes legitimacy, trust, and governance stability.

Across all cases, professional positioning in development discourse emerged as a core legitimacy-building strategy. Participants deployed academic excellence, scholarly productivity, and sustained institutional contribution as forms of reputational signaling that reinforced organizational credibility. In Legitimacy Theory terms, these practices constitute pragmatic legitimacy work—where

Table 2: Cross-case analysis

Sub-themes	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
Professional positioning in development discourse	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barriers to inclusive communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Agency-building and social change communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Protective communication practice	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
Curriculum as a development communication tool	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reframing institutional communication norms	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Institutional communication gaps	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Identity communication and narrative change	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Participatory communication and support systems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Public communication and development messaging	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Negotiated communication in diverse publics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transformative and dialogic communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Policy communication barriers	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Leadership communication for development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Communication for institutional and advocacy	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓

[✓] Clearly observed and fully implemented in the case; and [✗] Not observed or absent in the case

competence and performance serve as communicative capital within institutional hierarchies. However, persistent barriers to inclusive communication, including misnaming practices and symbolic exclusion, expose structural inconsistencies between institutional rhetoric and enacted norms. Such communicative dissonance represents a governance vulnerability, as unresolved microaggressions erode psychological safety, weaken internal trust, and compromise stakeholder confidence. Agency-building through social change communication thus operates simultaneously as a developmental intervention and a risk-mitigation strategy, stabilizing institutional reputation by aligning discourse, practice, and participatory engagement.

A second strategic pattern is the emergence of silence as a risk-managed identity strategy. Within conservative or faith-oriented institutional environments, overt identity assertion may generate reputational volatility. Protective communication practices, therefore, reflect adaptive governance behavior, enabling educators to preserve professional continuity while navigating cultural constraints. Importantly, silence does not signal compliance but calculated stakeholder sensitivity management. Curriculum integration further illustrates this dynamic: by embedding inclusivity into pedagogical structures without explicit confrontation, educators engage in incremental cultural recalibration. From a strategic management standpoint, such subtle normative adjustments enhance institutional adaptability while minimizing reputational backlash. Reframing institutional communication norms thus represents organizational learning in action—where professionalism is reconstructed to reflect evolving societal expectations and strengthen long-term legitimacy.

For educators undergoing gender transition, identity leadership functions as a catalyst for institutional change. Institutional communication gaps—particularly delays in administrative documentation—expose structural misalignments between governance systems and lived stakeholder realities. These bureaucratic deficiencies weaken institutional coherence and signal procedural inertia. However, identity communication and narrative reconstruction transform vulnerability into relational capital, fostering empathy-driven engagement that strengthens internal stakeholder bonds. Participatory communication and support networks further operate as resilience infrastructures, reinforcing organizational stability through relational trust. In this context, development communication intersects with change management theory: transformation is achieved not through abrupt disruption but through sustained relational engagement that incrementally reshapes institutional culture.

Beyond the classroom, public communication and development messaging extend legitimacy work into broader stakeholder ecosystems. Transgender educators act as visible representatives of institutional values in community outreach, partnerships, and public engagements. Their presence influences institutional branding, particularly in competitive higher education markets where reputation affects enrollment, funding opportunities, and collaborative networks. Negotiated communication in diverse publics reveals the tension between symbolic inclusivity and operational readiness, underscoring the importance of brand–policy congruence. Transformative and dialogic communication practices

contribute to relational brand equity, strengthening the institution's social license to operate through empathy-driven stakeholder engagement. In this way, development communication becomes a strategic mechanism for external alignment, enhancing reputational sustainability.

At the governance level, educators in administrative roles translate lived experience into structural reform. Policy communication barriers—manifested through procedural delays and bureaucratic dilution—reflect institutional resistance embedded within formal systems. Such inertia undermines organizational agility and weakens strategic positioning in socially progressive environments. Leadership communication for development, therefore, operates as executive-level change management, aligning governance frameworks with stakeholder expectations of equity and accountability. Evidence-based advocacy and data-informed reform proposals reposition inclusion not merely as an ethical obligation but as a strategic asset—contributing to talent retention, institutional competitiveness, and long-term sustainability. Communication for institutional change represents the institutionalization phase of transformation, where dialogic engagement converges with policy codification to embed equity within organizational architecture.

Collectively, the cross-case findings articulate a developmental model of strategic transformation in higher education organizations. Change originates at the micro-level through communicative legitimacy construction, expands through stakeholder alignment and relational engagement, and culminates in macro-level governance reform. Development communication thus functions as both a cultural intervention and a strategic management instrument—reducing reputational risk, enhancing stakeholder trust, and reinforcing institutional resilience. The experiences of transgender educators demonstrate that inclusive communication practices are not peripheral social initiatives but core governance mechanisms shaping organizational sustainability, legitimacy, and competitive positioning in contemporary academic environments.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This multiple-case study demonstrated that transgender educators in Metro Cebu universities employ strategic communicative practices that shape institutional legitimacy, governance responsiveness, and stakeholder trust within higher education organizations. Professional excellence functioned as a legitimacy-building mechanism within institutional systems characterized by normative constraints. Through adaptive identity strategies, participatory engagement, and curriculum-based communication practices, participants transformed experiences of marginalization into communicative agency that contributed to incremental cultural and organizational change.

The findings further revealed that institutional communication gaps and policy inertia expose governance vulnerabilities that may weaken internal trust and institutional coherence. However, leadership communication and evidence-informed advocacy can translate lived experiences into structural reform by embedding inclusive practices within administrative systems,

governance frameworks, and pedagogical environments. In this way, development communication operates not only as a process of social inclusion but also as a strategic organizational communication mechanism that supports institutional reform.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of integrating development communication into management practices within higher education institutions. Inclusive communication policies, leadership dialogue, and stakeholder engagement strategies can strengthen institutional credibility, enhance organizational trust, and promote sustainable governance in academic organizations. By recognizing communication as a core component of institutional leadership and governance, universities can better respond to evolving social expectations while fostering inclusive and resilient educational environments.

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for higher education management and institutional leadership. Development communication can serve as a strategic organizational communication mechanism, enabling universities to design inclusive communication policies, strengthen leadership communication practices, and improve stakeholder trust within academic institutions. By institutionalizing dialogic communication and participatory engagement, higher education leaders can create communication systems that recognize diversity while reinforcing professional legitimacy and organizational cohesion.

First, universities should integrate inclusive communication policies into institutional governance frameworks. Formal administrative protocols such as chosen-name recognition systems, gender-sensitive documentation processes, and clear anti-discrimination policies can align institutional communication practices with principles of inclusivity and organizational accountability. Such policies strengthen institutional credibility by ensuring that communication practices reflect both institutional values and stakeholder expectations.

Second, leadership communication strategies should emphasize transparency, dialogue, and relational engagement with institutional stakeholders. University administrators and academic leaders can strengthen organizational trust by fostering open communication channels that acknowledge and respect diverse identities and experiences. Leadership training programs that incorporate inclusive communication competencies can further support administrators in navigating diversity-related issues while maintaining institutional stability and governance responsiveness.

Third, development communication can enhance stakeholder engagement and institutional credibility by fostering collaborative relationships among educators, students, administrators, and community partners. Inclusive communication initiatives embedded in curriculum design, faculty development programs, and institutional outreach activities can strengthen stakeholder trust while promoting a culture of mutual respect and dialogue within academic organizations.

Finally, higher education institutions should involve transgender educators and other marginalized stakeholders in governance and

strategic planning processes. Inclusive participation in policy formulation and decision-making can improve institutional responsiveness while ensuring that governance structures reflect the diverse experiences of academic communities. By embedding inclusive communication within institutional management systems, universities can strengthen legitimacy, enhance stakeholder confidence, and promote sustainable organizational development.

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