

Communicating Women's Leadership in Higher Education: A Gendered Perspective on Visibility, Voice, and Recognized Authority

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ABSTRACT: Greater media visibility of women university leaders does not necessarily ensure equivalent recognition of their professional expertise, decision-making authority, or public voice. This conceptual article develops an integrative framework for examining how women's leadership is communicated in higher education through a gender-sensitive lens. Drawing on an interpretive synthesis of scholarship on gendered organizations, role congruity, framing, feminist discourse analysis, and dialogic public relations, the article distinguishes three analytically separate phenomena: media visibility, representations of authority, and audiences' recognition of authority. It proposes the Gendered Leadership Image-Communication Framework (GLICF), which connects five communicative stages with four dimensions for analyzing messages. Its central contribution is to articulate the visibility-authority gap: prominent representation does not necessarily convey a leader's substantive agency or generate public recognition of her authority. Four theoretical propositions specify potentially testable relationships and their contextual qualifications. As a conceptual contribution rather than an empirical investigation, the framework should be treated as a research agenda whose assumptions require testing through content analysis, audience research, and experimental designs.

KEYWORDS: higher education communication, women leaders, gender, media visibility, leadership authority, framing, public relations

1. INTRODUCTION

University websites, institutional news outlets, event photography, and social media have become consequential spaces through which institutions make leadership visible. Such communication does more than document who attends organizational activities; it also offers cues about who makes decisions, whose expertise is recognized, and who can be held accountable for institutional outcomes. Yet frequent exposure is not equivalent to being represented as an authoritative organizational actor.

The distinction is particularly consequential for women in leadership. Gendered organization theory suggests that ostensibly neutral institutional routines may distribute opportunity and recognition unevenly (Acker, 1990). Role congruity theory explains how social expectations attached to femininity can conflict with prevailing images of leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Framing research, meanwhile, establishes that public communication involves the selection and salience of particular aspects of social reality (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999).

Research in higher education has examined gendered visual representations on university homepages (Hoover et al., 2014), differences in university leaders' crisis communication (Angelakis et al., 2024), and representations of gender equality in Vietnamese university publications (Nguyen et al., 2025). Particularly relevant is Nguyen et al.'s (2025) analysis of the tension between public equality narratives and structural constraints on women academics' careers. Whereas that work examines institutional discourses of equality, the present article foregrounds how communication attributes authority to an identifiable woman leader and how that authority may subsequently be recognized by audiences.

The proposed gap does not presume that communication and gender in higher education are understudied. Rather, it concerns the need to connect three levels often treated separately: the visibility of a leadership figure, the representation of that figure's authority within a message, and audiences' recognition of that authority. The guiding question is therefore: under what conditions might media visibility translate into recognized authority for women university leaders, and when might that translation be disrupted?

The article pursues three objectives: to clarify its core constructs; to formulate an integrative framework for explaining the visibility-authority gap; and to develop theoretically grounded propositions for subsequent examination. It is a conceptual contribution and does not estimate the prevalence of gender bias in any particular group of institutions.

2. APPROACH TO CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The article adopts an interpretive theoretical synthesis rather than a systematic literature review. It does not claim exhaustive coverage of the relevant scholarship. Foundational texts were selected for their conceptual relevance to four intersecting concerns: gendered organizational arrangements; gender-based expectations of leadership; linguistic and visual representations of authority; and organizational dialogue with publics. Selected higher education studies are used to locate the conceptual problem and delimit the framework's applicability.

The synthesis proceeds through four analytical moves. First, it differentiates visibility, authority representation, and recognized authority. Second, it compares the explanatory contributions and limits of the theoretical traditions involved. Third, it identifies communicative stages in which the attribution of agency and voice may alter the meaning of visibility. Fourth, it develops conditional propositions connecting the constructs to possible empirical observations.

Because no systematic review protocol was undertaken, the article does not report database searches, screening counts, or exclusion rates as though these procedures had occurred. Purposive selection can overlook competing perspectives or contexts beyond higher education. Accordingly, the resulting framework is advanced as a revisable conceptual proposition rather than an exhaustive synthesis of evidence. In defining an appropriate theoretical contribution, the article draws on scholarship emphasizing explanatory mechanisms, originality, and utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Thatcher & Fisher, 2022).

3. CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS AND THE VISIBILITY-AUTHORITY GAP

Media visibility refers to the extent and prominence of an individual leader's presence within mediated institutional communication. Its observable indicators may include frequency of appearance, headline placement, visual prominence, and the space allocated to direct quotations. Visibility is a property of message content and circulation; it does not, in itself, establish how audiences evaluate the person depicted.

Authority representation concerns how texts, images, and audiovisual materials attribute decision-making power, expertise, initiative, and responsibility to a leadership actor. In a report on a research partnership, saying that a vice-chancellor "attended the signing ceremony" communicates a different kind of agency from specifying who designed the initiative, authorized the decision, or explained its anticipated consequences. Such distinctions become relevant to gender analysis only when examined across comparable cases. Neither an isolated verb nor a single photograph constitutes evidence of gender prejudice.

Voice denotes opportunities for a leader to articulate arguments, professional judgments, the reasoning behind decisions, and accounts of responsibility in her own words. It is related to but not interchangeable with authority representation: a person may be described as the decision-maker without being directly quoted, while an extensive quotation may reveal little about substantive decision-making power.

Recognized authority refers to an audience judgment that an individual possesses legitimate competence and power relevant to her leadership role. Legitimacy is a broader evaluative construct concerning whether an exercise of authority is regarded as appropriate or justified. Such reception-level constructs cannot be measured directly by coding institutional messages alone. Accountability, in turn, concerns the capacity to explain actions, accept scrutiny, address consequences, and correct errors; it should not be equated with favorable publicity.

Building on these distinctions, the article introduces the visibility-authority gap as an analytical condition in which prominent coverage is not accompanied by a commensurate representation of decision-making, expertise, or contribution, or in which such representations do not secure corresponding recognition among audiences. The concept therefore identifies two potentially separable disjunctions: between visibility and authority representation in messages, and between authority representation and audience recognition. It is a proposed analytical construct, not an empirically validated index.

4. GENDERED MECHANISMS IN LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

At the organizational level, decisions about what becomes news and who is authorized to speak may reflect formal hierarchies, established media routines, and gendered expectations. Acker's (1990) analysis provides a basis for questioning the apparent neutrality of organizational practices. Nevertheless, an observed communication difference should not be attributed to gender without considering plausible alternatives, including formal responsibilities, event participation, disciplinary specialization, and access to information.

At the level of message production, framing makes selected characteristics of a leader more salient (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999). Profiles that foreground care, dedication, or family sacrifice can express appreciation while potentially eclipsing professional accomplishments when strategic judgment and decision-making are left unspecified. Portraying a woman as an exceptional departure from the norm may likewise celebrate individual success while reproducing assumptions about who ordinarily belongs in leadership. Interpretation requires attention to context and comparison rather than treating particular descriptions as intrinsically discriminatory.

At the discursive and visual levels, Goffman (1979) and Lazar (2007) direct attention to who is positioned as acting, explaining, and deciding. Photographic placement, captions, active and passive constructions, and the absence of direct quotations should be interpreted within the wider communicative event. Critical discourse analysis cannot establish an editor's discriminatory intent from a single image; its analytical value lies in identifying recurrent patterns and the conditions under which they arise.

At the reception level, role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and scholarship on the potential social costs of women's self-promotion (Rudman, 1998) suggest that equivalent performances can elicit different evaluations when filtered through gender expectations. Actual interpretations are also shaped by professional experiences, institutional roles, and audience purposes. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional perspective cautions against assuming uniform experiences among women leaders or homogeneous responses among publics.

Finally, digital circulation enables communication to travel beyond its original institutional context and invites reinterpretation and challenge. Dialogic public relations situates responsible listening and responsiveness within ongoing organization-public relationships rather than reducing dialogue to a platform's comment function (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Evidence-based criticism of a university decision should be distinguished from gender-directed harassment. The institutional responsibility to manage communication and safeguard constructive participation must not be shifted solely onto women leaders.

5. THE GENDERED LEADERSHIP IMAGE-COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

The Gendered Leadership Image-Communication Framework (GLICF) integrates five communicative stages: selection, representation, circulation, reception, and response. These are not presented as independently novel communication stages. The integrative contribution is their use in locating where a visibility-authority gap may arise, become amplified, or be reduced.

Selection concerns institutional decisions about which individuals, events, and contributions are featured. Representation concerns the attribution of agency, professional evidence, voice, and visual prominence. Circulation addresses the movement and potential decontextualization of messages across channels. Reception captures how audiences interpret, compare, and assess communicated authority. Response encompasses explanations, dialogue, correction, and changes in communicative practice, which may subsequently influence selection and representation.

Four dimensions serve different analytical purposes: (1) visibility captures a leader's mediated prominence; (2) authority representation captures attributions of expertise and decision-making agency; (3) voice captures the presentation of direct reasoning and speech; and (4) accountability captures identifiable responsibility, evidentiary support, and opportunities for responsive exchange. Recognized authority is conceptualized as a potential reception outcome rather than a message-level dimension automatically inferable from content analysis. This distinction is intended to prevent the conflation of a message's representational properties with audiences' assessments.

GLICF highlights two theoretical connections requiring empirical scrutiny. The connection between visibility and authority representation depends partly on institutional selection and framing practices. The connection between authority representation and recognized authority depends partly on how audiences interpret leadership cues through gendered expectations. Dialogue and accountability may reinforce, challenge, or revise initial assessments. The framework does not assume that greater verbal assertiveness invariably reflects greater authority, or that ceremonial representation is inherently biased.

6. THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS AND AVENUES FOR EMPIRICAL TESTING

Proposition 1-Conditions of conversion: All else being equal, the association between media visibility and recognized authority is expected to be stronger when messages provide explicit evidence of a leader's decisions, expertise, and contributions than when they primarily document ceremonial attendance. This claim could be assessed through experimentally varied captions or content analysis paired with audience measures.

Proposition 2-Allocation of voice: Across comparable roles and events, messages that connect a leader's direct quotations with substantive professional reasoning and decision-making responsibility are expected to facilitate perceptions of authority more than messages featuring only greetings or generalized sentiment. The proposition is conditional and does not imply that the quantity of quotation alone measures competence.

Proposition 3-Biographical framing: Where profiles of women leaders emphasize family obligations and personal sacrifice more heavily than comparable profiles of men, assessments of professional competence may become more dependent on gender-role expectations. The direction and strength of such a relationship are expected to vary with cultural norms and audience attitudes; these should be modeled as possible moderators rather than presumed to have uniform effects.

Proposition 4-Dialogue and accountability: In communication concerning potentially contested institutional decisions, the provision of reasons, verifiable evidence, and responsible channels for response is expected to support judgments of trustworthiness and legitimacy more than exclusively positive image promotion. This relationship is likely to depend on the quality of the organization's underlying conduct; communication cannot substitute for equitable governance.

Future studies could combine coding of institutional news reports and photographs across universities with comparisons between women and men matched on role, event type, discipline, and publication period. Surveys or randomized message experiments could assess perceived authority and test contextual moderators. Gender identity, family circumstances, and other sensitive characteristics should not be inferred from names or appearances; relevant information must be collected ethically and with appropriate safeguards.

7. DISCUSSION: CONTRIBUTION, BOUNDARY CONDITIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The first contribution is an analytical separation of visibility, authority representation, and recognized authority. The distinction cautions against treating coverage frequency or favorable tone as direct proxies for equitable leadership recognition. While framing theories explain selective emphasis, the proposed framework makes the attribution of leadership agency an explicit object of analysis.

The second contribution is the organization of institutional structures, message production, and audience reception within a common analytical cycle. Its value does not depend on claiming that these communicative stages are new; rather, it offers an ordered set of assumptions for future empirical inquiry. A third contribution is the explicit incorporation of comparative conditions and alternative explanations: gender bias cannot responsibly be inferred from an isolated message or from unadjusted differences between leaders holding dissimilar roles.

The framework has important boundary conditions. In collegial governance arrangements, limited visibility may be a deliberate practice rather than an indication of diminished power. University-wide rules on public statements can restrict direct quotations irrespective of gender. Academic authority and administrative authority are also distinct: a highly influential scholar need not appear as the signatory of institutional decisions. Applications of GLICF must therefore specify the kind of authority and governance arrangements under investigation.

For higher education communicators, the framework invites reflection on whether institutional messages accurately identify who made a decision, on what grounds, and with what responsibilities. Equitable representation does not require exaggerating women leaders' achievements or prescribing a singularly assertive leadership persona; it requires accurate attribution and sustained scrutiny of potentially uneven representational conventions. Dialogic practice should encompass both protection against harassment and respect for legitimate criticism.

These implications follow from conceptual reasoning rather than an evaluated intervention. Improvements to communication cannot replace reforms concerning appointments, access to resources, workload distribution, or protection against discrimination.

8. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Three limitations qualify the contribution. First, the literature was assembled for conceptual synthesis and does not represent the results of a systematic, exhaustive review. Second, neither the framework nor its propositions has been tested using newly collected communication or audience data. Third, differences among higher education systems, institutional governance models, and publics may affect the applicability of the proposed relationships. Future research should evaluate construct distinctiveness, coding reliability, and conditions under which the propositions are supported or challenged.

The article argues that visibility is important but insufficient for establishing that women leaders' authority is adequately represented or publicly recognized. GLICF offers a structured way to examine how institutional communication selects, represents,

circulates, receives, and responds to leadership images while separating observable message properties from outcomes requiring audience evidence. By foregrounding the visibility-authority gap, the framework advances a testable agenda at the intersection of gender, public relations, and higher education.

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