

Winning on The World Stage: Strategic Public Relations Lessons from University for Development Studies' 2025 FISU Football World Cup Victory -Translating Sports Achievement into Long-Term Reputation and Marketing Strategies

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Abstract:

The 2025 Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire (FISU) World University Football Championship victory by the University for Development Studies (UDS), Ghana, represents a landmark achievement in African university sports and a defining moment in the institution's public visibility. Beyond the immediate athletic triumph, this success offers a compelling case for examining how sports achievements can be strategically leveraged for public relations (PR), marketing, and long-term reputation management in higher education. This paper argues that UDS' football successes, including its recent victories at the African University Football Championship and the global FISU tournament, demonstrate the strategic value of sports as a reputational asset when embedded within a coherent, institution-wide PR framework. Drawing on theories of relationship management, reputation management, sports communication, and institutional branding, the paper advances a conceptual model for translating episodic sports victories into sustainable institutional advantage. Through a qualitative, conceptual analysis informed by African and global literature, the paper highlights proactive storytelling, strategic media engagement, alumni mobilization, stakeholder partnerships, and global networking as critical mechanisms for converting athletic success into enduring reputation capital. The study contributes to scholarship on university public relations by foregrounding an African public university context and offering policy-relevant lessons for higher education institutions seeking to integrate sports achievements into long-term institutional advancement strategies.

Keywords: *University Public Relations, Sports Communication, Reputation Management, Institutional Advancement, FISU Football, African Higher Education, Strategic Marketing, UDS*

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, reputation has emerged as one of the most valuable intangible assets available to universities (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). Universities increasingly compete not only on academic quality but also on visibility, legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and brand differentiation. Within this competitive environment, sports achievements have become powerful, though often under-theorized, instruments of strategic public relations (PR) and institutional branding. While elite sports success is traditionally associated with professional clubs and national teams, universities across the globe are increasingly recognizing athletics as a strategic communication resource capable of shaping institutional identity, mobilizing stakeholders, and enhancing global visibility (Pedersen et al., 2020).

For African universities, the strategic value of sports is particularly significant. Higher education institutions on the continent often operate within constrained funding environments, intense public scrutiny, and uneven global visibility (Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Sawyerr, 2017). In such contexts, high-profile achievements, especially those that command international media attention, offer rare opportunities to reposition institutional narratives and project alternative images of excellence, resilience, and competitiveness. Sports victories thus become symbolic capital that can be harnessed to counter dominant deficit narratives often associated with African higher education. The University for Development Studies (UDS), Ghana, offers a compelling illustration of this dynamic. Established with a distinctive development-oriented mandate and multi-campus structure, UDS has, in recent years, recorded remarkable achievements in university sports.

Notably, the university emerged as African University Football Champions and subsequently achieved global acclaim by winning the 2025 FISU World University Football Championship, becoming the first African university to attain such a feat. These accomplishments positioned UDS at the center of global university sports discourse and generated unprecedented national and international media attention.

This paper argues that the significance of UDS' football successes extends far beyond the pitch. Rather, these victories constitute strategic communication moments that, when properly managed, can contribute to long-term reputation building, stakeholder engagement, and institutional advancement. The paper positions UDS' 2025 FISU victory as a case study and conceptual anchor for examining how sports achievements can be systematically integrated into a comprehensive PR and marketing framework within a public university context.

Specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. Situate university sports achievements within broader theories of public relations and reputation management;
2. Examine how UDS' recent football successes have functioned as reputational assets;
3. Propose a conceptual model for translating sports victories into sustainable institutional advantage; and
4. Offer policy-relevant recommendations for African universities seeking to leverage sports strategically.

By foregrounding an African public university context and drawing extensively on Ghanaian and African scholarship, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on strategic communication, institutional branding, and the role of non-academic achievements in higher education reputation management.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sports, Symbolism, and University Reputation

Sport has long been recognized as a powerful social institution capable of producing symbolic meanings that extend far beyond competition (Bourdieu, 1984; Rowe, 2004). In the university context, sports achievements function as symbolic

representations of discipline, excellence, teamwork, and institutional capacity. Studies in Europe and North America indicate that successful university sports programs contribute positively to institutional visibility, student recruitment, alumni engagement, and donor support (Clotfelter, 2011; Grix & Carmichael, 2012).

Reputation theory suggests that stakeholders form perceptions of institutions based on accumulated signals over time, including both academic and non-academic achievements (Fombrun, 1996). Sports victories, especially at international levels, act as high-impact signals that shape public perceptions rapidly and emotionally. As Brown and Cox (2017) argue, athletic success can humanize institutions, create shared pride, and foster emotional identification among stakeholders.

Within African higher education, however, sports have often been treated as peripheral to core academic missions (Amponsah & Onyame, 2014). This marginalization has limited the strategic exploitation of sports achievements for institutional branding. Yet recent developments, including the growing prominence of continental and global university sports competitions, suggest a need to rethink the place of sports within African university reputation strategies.

2.2 Public Relations and Strategic Reputation Management

Public relations scholarship conceptualizes reputation as the cumulative outcome of relationships between an organization and its stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The relationship management paradigm emphasizes dialogue, trust, mutual benefit, and long-term engagement as foundations of sustainable reputation. From this perspective, reputation is not merely a product of visibility but of consistent, value-driven communication.

Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) argue that reputation management involves aligning organizational identity, culture, and communication with stakeholder expectations. For universities, this alignment requires integrating academic achievements, research outputs, community engagement, and symbolic successes such as sports victories into a coherent narrative. In African contexts, scholars such as Ansu-Kyeremeh (2015) and Boafo (2018) emphasize

that strategic PR is essential for public institutions seeking legitimacy, public trust, and policy support.

2.3 Sports Communication in Higher Education

Sports communication has evolved into a specialized sub-field encompassing media relations, branding, fan engagement, and digital storytelling (Pedersen et al., 2020). In universities, sports communication intersects with institutional PR, marketing, and alumni relations. The “sports-as-PR” framework conceptualizes athletic success as a communication resource that can be leveraged to project institutional values and achievements (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

In the African university context, emerging studies highlight the growing role of sports in student engagement and institutional image (Ofori & Asamoah, 2021; Ndlovu, 2019). However, empirical and conceptual work linking university sports success to strategic PR and reputation management remains limited, underscoring the relevance of the present study.

2.4 Ghanaian and African Perspectives on University Image and Branding

Ghanaian scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the strategic importance of communication in higher education governance and reputation management (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 2015; Hinson et al., 2018). Studies on public universities in Ghana suggest that institutional image is shaped not only by academic quality but also by media visibility, stakeholder engagement, and symbolic achievements (Owusu-Mensah, 2019).

Similarly, African scholars argue that universities must adopt context-sensitive branding strategies that reflect local values while engaging global audiences (Teferra, 2014; Sawyerr, 2017). Sports achievements, particularly those with continental and global resonance, offer a unique avenue for bridging local relevance and international visibility.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1. Relationship Management Theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000);
2. Reputation Management Theory (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004); and
3. Sports Communication Theory (Pedersen et al., 2020).

Together, these frameworks support the central proposition that sports achievements should be strategically integrated into long-term PR systems rather than treated as isolated events.

3.1 Conceptual Position

The paper advances the position that university sports victories function as reputational catalysts. Their long-term impact, however, depends on deliberate PR strategies that convert short-term visibility into sustained stakeholder relationships and institutional credibility. UDS’ football successes illustrate how sports can reinforce narratives of excellence, resilience, and global competitiveness when aligned with institutional mission and values.

3.2 Conceptual Model: Translating Sports Achievement into Strategic PR

Sports Achievement / Victory

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Strategic Storytelling & Media Engagement

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Stakeholder Engagement (Students, Alumni, Government, Sponsors)

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Brand Enhancement & Global Visibility

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Institutional Advancement (Reputation, Partnerships, Resources)

This model underscores the sequential and cumulative nature of PR-driven reputation building through sports.

4. UDS SPORTS PERFORMANCE IN CONTEXT

4.1 UDS and the Rise of University Sports Excellence

Over the past decade, UDS has progressively invested in university sports as part of its holistic student development agenda. This investment yielded significant results, culminating in victories

at national and continental levels before achieving global success. Winning the African University Football Championship positioned UDS as a continental leader, while the 2025 FISU World University Football Championship victory elevated the university onto the global stage.

These achievements challenged dominant narratives that often marginalize African universities in global sports and academic discourses. They also reinforced UDS' identity as an institution capable of competing and excelling internationally.

4.2 Strategic Communication of the 2025 FISU Victory

The Directorate of Public Affairs at UDS played a central role in translating the football victory into a communication asset. Through coordinated press releases, live social media coverage, multimedia storytelling, and stakeholder briefings, the university ensured sustained media attention beyond the immediate post-match period.

In a post-victory address, the Vice-Chancellor emphasized the symbolic significance of the achievement, framing it as a collective institutional success rather than a standalone sports event. Such framing aligns with strategic PR principles that emphasize institutional, rather than individual, reputation building (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

5. STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS LESSONS FROM UDS' EXPERIENCE

5.1 Proactive Storytelling and Narrative Framing

UDS' experience underscores the importance of proactive storytelling in sports PR. Narratives highlighting student-athlete discipline, institutional support systems, and the alignment between sports excellence and academic values enhanced the credibility of the university's messaging.

5.2 Alumni Mobilization and Stakeholder Loyalty

The football victories served as rallying points for alumni engagement. Alumni associations organized celebratory events, fundraising initiatives, and mentorship programs, reinforcing emotional bonds between graduates and the institution. This aligns with African scholarship

emphasizing alumni relations as a strategic PR function (Asare & Mensah, 2020).

5.3 Brand Differentiation and Global Positioning

By winning at both continental and global levels, UDS differentiated itself within Ghana's higher education landscape. Strategic PR efforts ensured that the university's brand narrative emphasized both academic relevance and sports excellence, enhancing its attractiveness to prospective students and partners.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATEGIC PR AND MARKETING IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

- I. Institutionalize Sports Communication: Universities should establish dedicated sports PR units within public affairs directorates.
- II. Integrate Sports into Institutional Branding: Sports achievements should be embedded in official branding and marketing strategies.
- III. Strengthen Alumni and Corporate Partnerships: Sports victories should be leveraged for fundraising and sponsorship.
- IV. Leverage Digital Media and Global Networks: Strategic use of digital platforms can amplify global visibility.
- V. Evaluate PR Impact: Institutions should adopt metrics for assessing reputational outcomes of sports achievements.

7. CONCLUSION

The victories of the University for Development Studies at the African University Football Championship and the 2025 Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire (FISU) World University Football Championship underscore the transformative potential of sports as a strategic public relations and reputation-management instrument within higher education. These achievements demonstrate that when athletic success is deliberately embedded within a coherent, institution-wide public relations framework, it can transcend the immediacy of celebration and function as a sustained source of symbolic capital, institutional legitimacy, and long-term advancement. In this regard, sports victories operate not merely as episodic events but

as high-impact communicative moments that, when strategically managed, reinforce institutional identity, values, and credibility among diverse stakeholder groups.

From a strategic communication perspective, the UDS case illustrates how sports achievements can be integrated into broader narratives of academic relevance, student development, and global competitiveness. By aligning athletic excellence with institutional mission and development-oriented values, UDS was able to project a multidimensional brand image that resonates locally, continentally, and internationally. This alignment is particularly significant in the African higher education context, where universities often contend with limited resources, intense public scrutiny, and persistent challenges of global visibility. In such environments, strategically communicated sports success provides a rare opportunity to recalibrate institutional narratives, challenge deficit perceptions, and assert African universities' capacity for excellence on the world stage.

Moreover, the study reinforces the argument that effective university public relations is fundamentally relational and long-term in orientation. The UDS experience demonstrates that sports achievements can serve as powerful catalysts for stakeholder engagement, including alumni mobilization, student identification, governmental goodwill, and corporate and international partnerships. When leveraged through proactive storytelling, sustained media engagement, and inclusive stakeholder participation, athletic success contributes to the accumulation of reputation capital that extends beyond the sports arena into academic, social, and developmental domains of university life.

For African universities operating in increasingly competitive and resource-constrained environments, the implications of this study are both practical and strategic. Sports achievements should no longer be treated as peripheral or ancillary to the core academic mission but recognized as strategic assets within comprehensive institutional communication and marketing systems. University leadership and public affairs directorates must therefore adopt intentional policies that institutionalize sports communication, integrate it into branding and advancement strategies, and evaluate its

reputational impact using clear performance indicators.

Finally, this paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship on university public relations by foregrounding an African public university context and demonstrating the relevance of sports communication to institutional reputation management. Future research may build on this conceptual work by empirically examining stakeholder perceptions, media framing patterns, and long-term reputational outcomes associated with university sports success across different African contexts. Such inquiry would further strengthen understanding of how symbolic achievements, when strategically communicated, can support sustainable institutional advancement in higher education.

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