

# The Value-Based Guardian: Digital Public Relations, Pastoral Governance and Compliance Performativity in a Catholic Minority Women's College in Hyderabad

Pranay Rupani

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Communication, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India

## Abstract

The strategic use of social media for public relations (PR) in Indian higher education has been studied largely through the lens of posting frequency and engagement volume, leaving the governance logics that produce institutional communication comparatively unexamined. This paper examines how a private, autonomous, Catholic minority women's college in Hyderabad negotiates its digital public presence from a hybrid position between institutional independence and publicly funded compliance. Drawing on a case study of St. Francis College for Women, the analysis synthesises an ethnographic interview with the Principal and a trace analysis of 644 public posts published on the institution's official Facebook and Instagram handles between April and December 2025, each read with its full ledger of reach, views, reactions, shares and comments. It is found that the institution translates, rather than imposes, its Franciscan ethos through a digital pastoral pulpit, contextualised value pedagogy and asynchronous care; that crisis learning from a 2019 dress-code episode replaced institutional silence with proactive, empathetic communication; and that state mandates such as Unnat Bharat Abhiyan are converted from evidence of activity into evidence of impact. Across the corpus, a single structural pattern is observed: the intensity of administrative control over a piece of content is inversely related to its voluntary circulation. The administrator emerges as digital architect, warden, compliance officer and brand manager simultaneously. The findings extend Foucauldian and Goffmanian accounts of institutional order to algorithmically mediated educational settings and carry practical implications for values-led institutions negotiating audit culture and marketisation.

**Keywords:** Digital Public Relations, Social Media Governance, Higher Education, Compliance Performativity, Pastoral Care, Audit Culture, Critical Realism, Hyderabad

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions in India have transcended their traditional roles as centres of learning and now operate as complex, multi-stakeholder organisations competing for enrolments, faculty, funding and public trust. Within this environment, public relations has shifted from the periphery of administrative work to the core of institutional strategy: it is the mechanism through which an institution manages its legitimacy across students, parents, alumni, regulators and the wider community, a relationship-building

function long theorised in the foundational PR literature [1, 2]. The advent of social media has reconfigured the topography of these relationships. Platforms compress communication cycles and expand reach, yet they simultaneously introduce a control paradox: institutions possess more channels through which to disseminate their message but less control over how that message is interpreted, contested or recirculated by stakeholders [3, 4].

These pressures are felt with particular intensity in Hyderabad, a city whose dense concentration of public universities, private autonomous colleges and specialised institutions makes reputation a scarce and contested resource. For a private institution whose survival depends on the confidence of fee-paying parents rather than on guaranteed state funding, digital visibility is not ornamental; it is bound up with enrolment, accreditation and long-term market position within an increasingly marketised sector [5]. At the same time, Indian colleges are subject to a pervasive audit culture, in which regulatory bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) demand continuous, geotagged, documented evidence of institutional activity [6, 7]. The official social media handle is thereby conscripted into a double duty: it must persuade a public and satisfy an auditor at once.

This paper examines how one institution manages that double duty from an unusually instructive structural position. St. Francis College for Women, Hyderabad, is a private, autonomous, Catholic minority institution that receives public support through its UGC 12B status and a Telangana Government Grant-in-Aid. It is therefore neither a creature of the state, obliged to absorb federal campaigns wholesale, nor a fully market-facing enterprise free of compliance obligations. It occupies a hybrid space between independence and publicly funded compliance, and it is precisely this hybridity that makes the college a revealing site for studying how governance filters digital communication. The institution is characterised here as a Value-Based Guardian: a legacy college whose digital conduct is organised around the translation of a historical ethos, the Franciscan commitment to simplicity, dignity and inward growth, into an algorithmic environment that rewards spectacle.

Three questions guide the analysis. First, how does a values-led institution govern the tension between its traditional ethos and the hyper-visual self-expression of its student body? Second, how does a hybrid institution negotiate state compliance mandates, and with what observable consequences in its engagement data? Third, what does the fine grain of platform metrics, particularly the share count, reveal about the relationship between administrative control and public circulation? The paper is drawn from a larger comparative study of three Hyderabad institutions; the present analysis isolates the private autonomous case because it demonstrates most clearly that compliance need not remain inert obedience but can be converted into circulating reputational capital.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is anchored in the relational turn in public relations scholarship, which reconceives PR not as one-way press agency but as the dialogic management of organisation-public relationships [1, 10]. In digitally mediated settings this relational work is complicated by context collapse, the flattening of multiple distinct audiences into a single feed, so that a post addressed to an in-group of the faithful is simultaneously legible to prospective parents, auditors and critics [11]. It is further complicated by polymedia conditions, in which stakeholders distribute their communicative life across public platforms and private channels, meaning that the official feed is only the visible stratum of a larger communicative ecology [12].

Two older sociological vocabularies are extended to this setting. The first is Michel Foucault's account of panoptic discipline [8]. The term Pastoral Panopticon is used in this study to describe the historical architecture of care at a faith-based women's college, in which oversight operated less through punitive surveillance than through a pastoral ethic of continuous, visible care, so that watching and caring were fused in the same institutional gaze. The analysis traces how this architecture is transformed when students who guard their privacy can no longer be cared for at the campus gates, and care migrates into asynchronous digital nurturing. The second is Erving Goffman's notion of the institutional underlife, the unofficial activity that members conduct beneath the formal order [9]. The phrase unverified underlife, coined for this study, extends Goffman's concept to the anonymous confession pages, review platforms and unofficial digital spaces that now surround the college's official feed and carry the friction that the curated public channel evacuates.

Two further concepts organise the reading of the compliance data. Compliance performativity denotes the production of digital artefacts whose primary addressee is an upstream auditor rather than a downstream public; such artefacts are receipts, designed to exist rather than to circulate, and they are the digital sediment of the audit society described by Michael Power (1997) [6] and the audit cultures analysed by Marilyn Strathern (2000) [7]. Institutional isomorphism explains why the compliance repertoire looks so similar across otherwise different institutions: coercive and mimetic pressures generate a shared vocabulary of mandated observances, accreditation workshops and ranking announcements [14]. Finally, datafication, the conversion of institutional and aspirational life into quantifiable data [13], frames the reading of platform metrics themselves: reach, views and shares are treated not as scores on a common scale of popularity but as symptoms pointing back towards the institutional logic that produced them.

### **3. Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design rooted in Social Constructivism and Critical Realism [15]. Critical Realism posits a stratified reality in which the underlying structures that generate events (the Real), the actual occurrences such as viral dissent or mandated campaigns (the Actual), and the observable data artefacts (the Empirical) must be synthesised to understand institutional dynamics. The digital university is accordingly treated not as a marketing channel but as a contested communicative space whose observable outputs are surface expressions of deeper organisational mechanisms. The study is classified as mixed methods because qualitative interpretation is complemented by systematically organised quantitative platform metrics, although qualitative analysis remains the primary analytical mode.

The case was selected purposively within a comparative case study design [16] as the private autonomous archetype in a maximum-variation sample of three Hyderabad institutions. Two evidentiary streams are synthesised. The first is an ethnographic, structured in-depth interview with the Principal, which supplies the administrative interpretation of the institution's digital governance, its crisis history and its compliance philosophy. The second is a row-by-row trace analysis of 644 public posts published on the college's official Facebook page and Instagram handle between 1 April and 31 December 2025, organised into three consecutive quarterly phases. Each post carries its full platform-native ledger of reach, views, reactions, likes, shares, comments and saves. Particular analytic weight is placed on the share count, interpreted as the truest measure of voluntary redistribution: reach can be purchased and views can be carried by the recommendation algorithm, but a share must be given freely by an audience member who chooses to propagate the message.

Reflexive thematic analysis was applied to the corpus [17], with themes developed iteratively across the interview material and the trace data and each theme anchored to named, dated artefacts. Ethical conduct followed the Internet Research Ethical Guidelines 3.0 of the Association of Internet Researchers [18]: only public, institutional posts were analysed, individual commenters are not named, and closed-network content was excluded. It is acknowledged that the researcher occupies a practitioner-observer position within Hyderabad's higher education communication ecosystem; this insider familiarity was disciplined through a reflexive journal and through the deliberate practice of grounding every interpretive claim in recoverable artefacts.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 The Governance of Values and the Digital Pastoral Pulpit**

A primary friction point for legacy institutions is the reconciliation of a history of traditional modesty with the modern student's desire for a highly curated, aestheticised life. The college's response is notable for what it refuses to do: it does not police contemporary self-expression. When a student farewell was themed around glitter and glamour, and when a Masquerade Ball was staged, the administration traced the masquerade back to fifteenth-century Renaissance Italy and delivered a lesson on digital and personal authenticity, urging students to let the world know their real selves. Contemporary expression is thus contextualised within the institution's motto, Wisdom and Peace through Love, rather than restricted by it. The same pedagogy recurs in the value of the month ritual, through which departments translate abstract virtues into visible activity: a Zoology department display on resilience, a Psychology department suicide-prevention dance built on resilience and hope. In Critical Realist terms, these artefacts are empirical traces of a structural conviction that values are transmitted not by prohibition but by ambient, repeated, gently performed example.

The behavioural data lends this pastoral strategy an unexpected vindication. The wellbeing-oriented artefacts are among the most heavily amplified in the corpus. A Psychology department session on psychological first aid converted a reach of roughly four thousand accounts into nearly twenty-eight thousand views, an amplification ratio approaching seven to one, which is the algorithmic signature of content escaping its origin audience and propagating through the feeds of non-followers. The digital pastoral pulpit, in other words, is not preaching to a captive congregation; its gentlest, most therapeutic material is precisely what the recommendation engine carries furthest. Care, the data suggests, can be delivered asynchronously, through ambient encounter while students casually scroll, rather than through the physical proximity of the historical Pastoral Panopticon.

### **4.2 Crisis Learning and the Unverified Underlife**

The institution's crisis doctrine was forged in failure. During a 2019 dress-code controversy, legacy governance tactics, asynchronous and closed-door faculty deliberation, proved ineffective against the speed of the internet; being ten to fourteen hours late meant losing the narrative entirely, as external entities and unverified voices interpreted events for the media. The lesson was institutionalised permanently: silence during a digital crisis is disastrous, and the college replaced it with proactive, empathetic external communication. The divergence from the public university examined elsewhere in the larger study is structural rather than temperamental. A central university, secure in the canonical weight of its state-backed channels, can afford strategic silence; a private college, whose reputation is its principal capital, cannot.

The administration simultaneously contends with the institution's unverified underlife: anonymous confe-

ssion pages and map-service reviews that thrive precisely where systemic gaps exist and where students fear repercussions. The institutional posture is pragmatic rather than punitive. These spaces are categorised as symptomatic rather than disruptive; designated staff quietly filter the noise, and when genuine structural issues surface they are routed to the administration for internal processing. This posture leaves a distinctive negative imprint on the official dataset: across all three quarters the verified feeds contain almost no trace of controversy, grievance or dissent. The public record is composed overwhelmingly of celebration, ceremony, collaboration and compliance. The absence is not evidence that the college is free of friction, as the very existence of the confession pages testifies otherwise; it is evidence of a governance strategy that systematically routes contention away from the curated public channel. The official feed is a deliberately constructed surface; the underlife, monitored but never amplified, is where the unedited pulse of the institution continues to beat.

### 4.3 The Hybrid State and the Conversion of Compliance

As a private autonomous institution receiving public funding, the college participates in the same compliance economy as the public university: its handles function intermittently as nodes in a larger government information network, and audit culture demands continuous documented evidence of activity for the UGC, NAAC and NIRF. What distinguishes the college is a deliberate administrative philosophy of shifting from evidence of activity to evidence of impact. The clearest example is the central government's Unnat Bharat Abhiyan scheme, which mandated the adoption of five villages. Initially perceived as an administrative burden, the mandate was converted into a core pedagogical exercise: the adopted villages in Sangareddy district were assigned to student clubs, directing organisational enthusiasm towards marginalised communities and ultimately elevating the college to a model institution on international platforms. A parallel benefit was recorded on the archival side: the audit portals that create such stress for faculty simultaneously solve the historical problem of fading institutional memory by functioning as a permanent digital archive of college life.

The engagement data registers this conversion with precision. When the compliance and audit artefacts are isolated as a class, they exhibit a distinctive fingerprint: the IQAC workshops on NAAC reform, the Academic Bank of Credits mentoring sessions, the audit-preparedness orientations and the external academic audit itself achieve respectable reach and views, frequently ten to twenty thousand views apiece carried by the Reels algorithm, yet they provoke remarkably little voluntary redistribution, averaging roughly seven shares per post, the lowest of any thematic category in the dataset. Audit content is produced to be seen by the auditor and archived for the file, not forwarded by an enthusiastic public. Yet the mandated observances that carry genuine ceremonial or cultural charge behave entirely differently: the seventy-ninth Independence Day celebration reached some eight and a half thousand accounts for more than forty-one thousand views; a Dance Fusion performance staged with the Telangana government's Department of Language and Culture drew over two hundred shares; and the International Yoga Day observance, organised with a certified instructor and more than a hundred participating students, gathered seventeen thousand views and eighty-four shares, an engagement profile suggesting the mandate was absorbed into the college's own wellness narrative rather than experienced as an imposition. When a compliance mandate is metabolised into a genuinely felt institutional event, the audience responds with the redistribution that the bare audit notice never earns.

### 4.4 The Economics of Safety and Strategic Brand Management

The marketisation of higher education obliges the college to address two conflicting audiences simultaneously: prospective students seeking autonomy and parents demanding structure and protection.

The administration bridges the dichotomy by framing safety as enabling security, a stable foundation that makes student independence sustainable. The framing is performed visibly in the data: a mock fire drill conducted with the Secunderabad fire station gathered nearly sixteen thousand views and more than six hundred reactions, converting the abstract promise of protection into a documented, shareable event addressed less at the scrolling student than at the watchful parent. Internally, student lifecycle applications such as OnEdu and WinnOU construct walled gardens that secure academic interaction away from the volatile public gaze while allowing grievances to bypass physical gatekeepers and reach the Principal directly.

Recognising that an authentic organic history does not automatically translate into visibility in an algorithmically driven market, the college has moved from passive word-of-mouth reputation to active national brand management, formalised in a Memorandum of Understanding with the Public Relations Society of India for the 2025 to 2027 term and performed through a dense sequence of institutional partnerships with hospitals, universities and firms in India and abroad. The behavioural ceiling of this strategy is instructive. The announcement of a corporate MoU with an information-technology firm recorded a reach of 105,863 accounts and 156,707 views, by an order of magnitude the largest distribution event in the dataset, yet attracted only 525 reactions, a ratio of engagement to distribution thin enough to bear the signature of paid or heavily boosted promotion. Its reach was purchased, not earned. The announcement of the college's eighth-place national ranking tells the opposite story: against a more modest twenty thousand views it gathered 646 likes and 354 shares, indicating that students and alumni actively chose to brandish the ranking as a token of their own affiliation. An institution can pay to advertise its reach; it cannot buy organic redistribution. Audiences share only what reflects their own pride.

#### 4.5 The Inverse Relationship between Control and Circulation

When the full corpus is partitioned by theoretical category and read through aggregated engagement signatures, a single organising principle comes into focus: the intensity of administrative control over a piece of content is inversely related to its circulation. The artefacts produced under the tightest compliance discipline circulate least, because their governing logic is to satisfy an upstream auditor. The artefacts that touch the lived experience of the community or confer transferable pride circulate most, because the audience chooses to forward them: a student canteen inauguration at 619 shares, the national ranking at 354, a Teaching Staff Day Out at 308, the state-cultural performances in the low hundreds. Table 1 presents selected artefacts with their engagement signatures, and Table 2 summarises the redistribution pattern by thematic category.

**Table 1: Selected Digital Artefacts and Their Engagement Signatures (April to December 2025)**

| Artefact                                                       | Period   | Reach  | Views  | Platform Engagement | Analytical Significance                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------|--------|--------|---------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Education World ranking announcement (8th, private autonomous) | Apr 2025 | 11,395 | 20,328 | 1,025 (354 shares)  | Marketised social capital; organic pride |
| IQAC workshop on NAAC reforms                                  | Apr 2025 | 4,010  | 10,420 | 260                 | Compliance performativity; audit gaze    |
| International Yoga Day observance                              | Jun 2025 | 5,000+ | 17,000 | 84 shares           | Mandate absorbed as wellness narrative   |

| Artefact                                                   | Period   | Reach   | Views   | Platform Engagement | Analytical Significance                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------|----------|---------|---------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Dance Fusion, with Telangana Dept. of Language and Culture | Jul 2025 | 8,722   | 32,647  | 1,051 (200+ shares) | State collaboration metabolised into event     |
| 79th Independence Day celebrations                         | Aug 2025 | 8,519   | 41,595  | 521                 | Sovereignty observance with cultural charge    |
| Psychological First-Aid session (Dept. of Psychology)      | Sep 2025 | 4,219   | 27,885  | 326                 | Asynchronous pastoral care; 7x amplification   |
| Suicide-prevention dance (value of the month)              | Sep 2025 | 6,389   | 28,514  | 477                 | Contextualised value pedagogy                  |
| Teaching Staff Day Out                                     | Sep 2025 | 10,984  | 39,128  | 1,063 (308 shares)  | Institutional warmth; voluntary redistribution |
| Principal receives three national awards                   | Oct 2025 | 57,828  | 80,191  | 851                 | Leader-as-brand dynamic                        |
| Corporate MoU with IT firm                                 | Oct 2025 | 105,863 | 156,707 | 525                 | Purchased reach; thin organic engagement       |
| External Academic Audit 2025                               | Nov 2025 | 7,716   | 11,739  | 71                  | Documentary audit receipt                      |

**Table 2: Voluntary Redistribution by Thematic Category (Share Counts)**

| Thematic Category             | Representative Artefacts                               | Typical Share Count                 | Governing Logic                        |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Audit and compliance cluster  | IQAC orientations, ABC mentoring, external audit       | About 7 per post (category average) | Addressed to the auditor; documentary  |
| Mandates with cultural charge | Independence Day, Yoga Day, state cultural performance | 84 to 200+                          | Mandate converted into felt event      |
| Marketised prestige           | National ranking announcement                          | 354                                 | Transferable pride; social capital     |
| Community and staff welfare   | Canteen inauguration, Teaching Staff Day Out           | 308 to 619                          | Lived experience; institutional warmth |

The share count, throughout, is the truest reader of institutional reality: it cannot be mandated, only earned, and it is earned precisely where the administration's grip is loosest. The comprehensive picture is of an administrator who must function simultaneously as crisis communicator, digital warden, compliance data officer and proactive brand manager, a multifaceted burden that defines contemporary academic leadership in the private sector.

## 5. Discussion

Three contributions follow from the case. First, the analysis extends the Foucauldian account of pastoral discipline to algorithmically mediated education [8]. The historical Pastoral Panopticon, in which care was physical and localised at the campus gates, has been rendered obsolete by students who guard their privacy; yet pastoral power has not disappeared but migrated, becoming asynchronous, curatorial and ambient. The institution no longer watches its students at the gate; it seeds their feeds with alternative anchors of meaning and allows the recommendation engine to complete the pastoral circuit. That the

platform algorithm amplifies precisely the therapeutic content furthest is an irony worth theoretical attention: commercial infrastructures of engagement here become unwitting carriers of institutional care. Second, the case refines the understanding of compliance under audit culture [6, 7]. The dominant image in the literature, and the pattern observed at the public university in the wider study, is of compliance as inert performance: receipts produced for the file. The St. Francis data complicates this picture by demonstrating a measurable capacity to convert obligation into capital. The village-adoption mandate became genuine pedagogy; the mandated national observances earned real redistribution; even the audit portals were reinterpreted as a permanent institutional archive. The private autonomous institution, precisely because its survival depends on reputation rather than guaranteed funding, cannot afford compliance as mere obedience; it must extract reputational value from every obligation, and the engagement data shows it largely succeeding. Compliance performativity is thus not a fixed condition but a variable governed by institutional position: the same federal directive produces compliance with friction in one governance model and compliance as assimilation in another.

Third, the case demonstrates the analytic value of treating platform metrics as symptoms rather than scores. A reach figure of one hundred thousand and a reach figure of two thousand are not a loud event and a quiet one on a common scale of popularity; they are artefacts of entirely different generative mechanisms, one a boosted corporate announcement engineered for market visibility, the other an intimate liturgical observance addressed to an in-group of the faithful. Reading the metrics realistically, through the stratified ontology of Critical Realism [15], exposes the single structural law that the raw numbers conceal: administrative control and voluntary circulation vary inversely. This finding, replicated across the wider comparative study, suggests that the strategy-engagement-reputation pathway assumed in much digital PR literature is not universal but governance-filtered, and that institutional reputation is strongest where the visible narrative aligns with lived stakeholder experience. The limitations of the analysis follow from its design: it is a single-institution case within one city and one nine-month window, its interview evidence is drawn from the institution's own leadership, and the underlife spaces that carry unofficial sentiment were deliberately not mined, for ethical reasons [18]. The dissent that the official feed evacuates is therefore registered here only as an absence. Crisis communication insights, similarly, rest on the administration's retrospective account of the 2019 episode rather than on contemporaneous data [19], and critical perspectives on the profession caution against reading institutional self-presentation at face value [20].

## **6. Conclusion**

Four conclusions are drawn. First, values-led digital governance is achievable without prohibition: St. Francis College translates its Francisian ethos into the algorithmic era through contextualised value pedagogy and an asynchronous digital pastoral pulpit, and the platform data independently confirms that this therapeutic register is the college's most amplified content. Second, crisis capability in the private sector is structurally compelled: an institution whose principal capital is reputation cannot afford silence, and the college's permanent professionalisation of proactive, empathetic crisis response after 2019 represents rational adaptation, not merely cultural preference. Third, compliance can be converted: the shift from evidence of activity to evidence of impact, exemplified by the Unnat Bharat Abhiyan village adoptions and legible in the engagement gap between an audit orientation at roughly seven shares and a state cultural spectacle at more than two hundred, demonstrates that hybrid institutions can metabolise state mandates into reputational and pedagogical assets. Fourth, and most generally, the intensity of

administrative control over content is inversely related to its voluntary circulation; the share count is the truest reader of institutional reality because it cannot be purchased or mandated, only earned. For practitioners, the implication is direct: an institution's most valuable digital capital is generated in the moments when it trusts its community, its students, staff, alumni and faithful, to find the story worth sharing. For researchers, the case indicates that digital public relations in higher education is best studied not as a standardised professional practice but as a governance practice, whose observable outputs are legible only against the institutional logic that produced them.

### Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the guidance of Prof. Kanchan K. Malik, Department of Communication, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, under whose supervision the doctoral research from which this paper is drawn was conducted, and thanks the Principal of St. Francis College for Women, Hyderabad, for the interview access that made the case study possible.

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