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REPUTATION IN FOCUS: THE ROLE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION IN SHAPING PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IMAGE IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how public universities in Malaysia use corporate communication strategies to enhance their reputation. While much of the previous research has focused on boosting academic and research rankings, broader aspects of university reputation have often been overlooked. To fill this gap, the study examined four universities from different regions of the country: Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). In-depth interviews were conducted with corporate communication directors and deputy directors from each institution. Using thematic analysis, common themes have been identified to understand how these universities plan and implement their communication strategies. The findings were then reviewed by corporate communication experts from both academia and industry to ensure validity. The study identified four key strategies used to build a positive reputation. Although academic and research visibility remain top priorities, the findings suggest that universities should also invest more in strategic corporate branding. In addition, both academic and industry experts highlighted the value of having communication leaders who bring together academic understanding and practical experience. They noted that this balanced skill set can enhance the effectiveness of university communication efforts and contribute positively to building institutional reputation.

KEYWORDS: Corporate Communication, University, Reputation, Social Media, Communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

A phrase by Chuck Martin, “The result of bad communication is a disconnection between strategy and execution”, shows how essential communication is in an organization, no matter the size and type of business. Too often, organizations only bring in the communications team after decisions are made, resulting in fatality in decision-making due to the absence of a communication perspective to anticipate risk, to help shape strategies that protect and strengthen a company’s reputation. Despite the importance of managing university image and reputation, scholars have paid little attention to this topic, leaving important aspects unexplored. In particular, there is a lack of research on the keys to maintaining university reputation (Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando *et al.*, 2018; Rodionov and Ibragimov, 2022; Tight, 2022).

In the context of higher education, this assertion underscores the critical role of communication in aligning academic and administrative actions with the institution’s overarching strategic objectives. Research indicates that effective strategic communication enhances the quality and efficacy of the strategy implementation process, thereby improving strategic success among higher education institutions (Lim & Chuah, 2022). Globalization has driven universities to improve their research output, education quality, and social engagement while attracting more students to succeed tremendously (Bakhtadza & Talikedze, 2022; Lourenço & Paiva, 2024). Recent research highlights the critical importance of institutional reputation in maintaining competitiveness and achieving success within the globalized education sector (Mateus & Acosta, 2022; Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). As globalization continues to grow and the number of universities worldwide increases, higher education ranking systems have become increasingly significant.

In Malaysia, public universities have traditionally focused on improving their academic rankings, particularly those related to research output and teaching excellence. However, the measurement of university performance is often communicated through international rankings (Mateus *et al.*, 2025). This measurement is lack in terms of considering the whole involvement of stakeholders especially in measuring their perception. Reputation is an essential intangible asset for many businesses, including higher education institutions (HEIs) (Marelby & Fernando, 2022; Rashid & Mustafa, 2020). A university’s reputation can be defined as the collective opinions formed by its internal and

external stakeholders over time. In marketing and business, reputation affects consumer purchase intentions. When applied to education, a university’s reputation influences students’ enrollment decisions, shapes their social and academic priorities, and attracts top faculty (Kayyali, 2023; Li & Nan, 2023; Reymert *et al.*, 2023). All universities aim to be in the top list in the university rankings. A good reputation allows universities to attract research and teaching staff with high academic training and an outstanding career, improves financial performance, positioning, media coverage (Suomi *et al.*, 2014) investment attraction, as well as the advantage competitiveness and the success of the university (Vogler, 2020).

Despite the growing importance of corporate communication in shaping the reputation of universities, there remains a notable gap in existing research that investigates how public universities in Malaysia employ these strategies. Previous studies have primarily focused on improving academic rankings and research performance (Maringe & Carter, 2007), often overlooking the broader aspects of university reputation that are essential for attracting students, faculty, funding, and industry partners. There is an urgent need for universities to develop robust corporate communication strategies that go beyond academic achievements and emphasize institutional values, branding, and stakeholder engagement. Understanding how universities in Malaysia navigate these challenges will contribute to a better understanding of how communication strategies can be aligned with broader institutional goals to improve reputation.

Effective corporate communication strategies should blend all the resources to build a positive institutional reputation that resonates with both internal and external stakeholders, including students, alumni, faculty, prospective partners, and the general public (Hallahan, 2005). Yet, there has been limited focus on how universities in Malaysia leverage such strategies, particularly in the era of digital communication and social media. In today’s highly connected world, social media platforms, for example, have become key tools in shaping public perception, providing universities with an opportunity to engage directly with a global audience (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

Furthermore, the role of corporate branding, leadership in communication, and the integration of social media strategies remain underexplored in the context of Malaysian public universities. Most studies have focused on private universities as their subjects. Mateus and Acosta (2022) mentioned that the problems in the higher education corporate

communication strategies are inconsistencies in the conceptualization and application of reputation that resulted in limited progress in the field. As higher education becomes increasingly competitive both locally and internationally, universities must develop robust corporate communication strategies that go beyond academic achievements and emphasize institutional values, branding, and stakeholder engagement (Melewar & Saunders, 2000). The need for such strategies is critical for Malaysian public universities as they aim to not only enhance their visibility in academics and research but also strengthen their reputation in a broader societal context. The impact of leadership in corporate communication offices on reputation management, particularly the influence of leaders with a blend of academic and industry experience also one of the important elements understudied.

The purpose of this study is to explore how public universities in Malaysia employ corporate communication strategies to improve their reputation. Specifically, the study aims to explore the corporate communication strategies employed by Malaysian public universities to enhance their reputation. This study also highlights challenges faced by the communication unit in enhancing and maintaining its reputation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. University Reputation

According to Argenti and Druckenmiller (2004), corporate image can be defined as an organisation's identity and brand as perceived by stakeholders. Since different constituencies, such as customers, investors, or employees, may view the organisation differently, it can simultaneously hold multiple images. Corporate reputation represents a longer-term, collective evaluation that develops over time from consistent organisational behaviour, performance, and stakeholder perceptions. Meanwhile, a corporate brand encompasses the organisation as a whole and may include several distinct product brands (Osei, Katsner, & Narteh, 2014). It not only communicates expectations about the quality of its products, services, and overall customer experience but also reflects aspirational attributes. Gregory (2007) stated that to achieve these outcomes, involvement and interaction with stakeholders are crucial. Organisations should engage in branding as an ongoing process, communicating their identity, values, and commitments to stakeholders to shape perceptions. By conducting sustained and coherent branding activities, an organisation can influence stakeholders'

immediate perceptions of its image and, over time, build and reinforce its corporate reputation.

University reputation has long been identified as a critical factor for the success and competitiveness of higher education institutions. According to Fombrun (1996), reputation is the collective perception that external stakeholders form based on a range of factors, including the institution's values, academic and research quality, and social impact. Reputation directly influences student enrollment, faculty recruitment, funding opportunities, and overall institutional credibility (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). As universities are increasingly recognized as global entities, reputation becomes even more important for establishing their position in a competitive international landscape (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

Recent studies show that while academic rankings have historically been the focal point for reputation-building, universities are recognizing the need for a more holistic approach to reputation management that incorporates corporate communication, branding, and stakeholder engagement (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). According to Kallio & Kallio (2020), an effective reputation management strategy incorporates a wide array of institutional characteristics, including academic achievements, research output, social responsibility, and engagement with the community. The growing significance of university reputation is also evidenced by the rise of global university rankings like the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, which now take into account factors like employer reputation, student satisfaction, and international outreach (Williams, 2018).

Corporate communication is essential for universities looking to manage and enhance their reputation. As Hallahan (2005) notes, corporate communication encompasses the strategic management of messages and relationships with stakeholders. For universities, this involves ensuring that the narrative of their academic and research activities is consistent with their values and that the messages they communicate are aligned with public expectations. The best outcomes happen when corporate communication department involved in dominant coalitions and has a voice at the table of decision making from the beginning.

In recent years, scholars have emphasized that universities must move beyond traditional communication channels such as press releases and institutional websites and embrace more dynamic, interactive communication strategies that engage a

wide array of stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2017). This shift reflects a broader trend in organizational communication where institutions are increasingly relying on digital and social media platforms to communicate directly with students, faculty, alumni, and the general public (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). By crafting well-rounded corporate communication strategies that encompass both traditional and digital media, universities can more effectively manage their reputation and strengthen stakeholder trust (Avery, 2010).

2.2. Stakeholder Engagement

In today's rapidly changing world, meaningful engagement is more crucial than ever. Universities can no longer operate in isolation. The reputation of higher education institutions (HEIs) is not only shaped by students' perceptions but also by how effectively other internal and external stakeholders believe the institution is fulfilling its objectives (Durán & García, 2020). Stakeholders in higher education include any individual or group that can affect or be affected by the institution's ability to achieve its goals. Stakeholder engagement has attracted growing interest due to the rising awareness among stakeholders about the significant role that business activities, processes, and behaviours play in driving an organization's long-term success (Habisch *et al.*, 2011; Qiu *et al.*, 2021). As a result, there is an increasing emphasis on the need for managers to focus on developing effective stakeholder engagement strategies (Stocker *et al.*, 2020).

Empirical studies suggest that stakeholder engagement produces different outcomes depending on the policy sector in which it is applied. In the context of higher education, the process is often complicated by unclear problem definitions, conflicting goals, and diverse stakeholder interests, which contribute to varying interpretations of what stakeholder engagement entails and what its objectives should be (Hu *et al.*, 2023; Lyu, 2023; Shawky *et al.*, 2023). These authors emphasize that, unlike more structured sectors in higher education, stakeholder engagement is inherently complex and must be understood through the lens of multiple, often competing, perspectives.

From a theoretical standpoint, several frameworks offer insights into how institutions should engage stakeholders. Stakeholder theory posits that organizations must consider various stakeholder groups' diverse expectations and influence to achieve desired outcomes. In this view, engagement is not optional but essential for aligning

interests and improving institutional effectiveness. Similarly, legitimacy theory stresses the need for organizations to respond to societal expectations, functioning under a social contract to maintain legitimacy and public trust. As Awa *et al.* (2024) and Velte (2023) argue, institutions that neglect their social environment risk losing reputation and stakeholder support.

More recently, multi-helix models have been proposed to guide stakeholder engagement in higher education institutions (HEIs). These models advocate for inclusive collaboration beyond students and faculty to involve industry players, community stakeholders, and government entities. As Jongbloed *et al.* (2008) introduced initially and Wilson *et al.* (2024) further developed, these models underline the idea that institutional reputation is co-created through a network of actors working together toward shared educational and societal goals.

Kessler *et al.* (2019) highlighted the significant impact of stakeholder roles on how organizations. Stakeholders need to understand business processes and behaviours through effective engagement which does not only focus on legitimizing the organization. Material internal stakeholders such as employees were left uncertain about job security, remuneration and bonuses, and other stakeholders (such as suppliers) were left unsure about organizations' ability to repay debts (Science and Australia, 2020; Almeida and Santos, 2020). On a broader level, the global pandemic has raised questions about companies' relationships with the environment and highlighted the direct and immediate effect that environmental factors have on performance and stakeholder relations (Atkins *et al.*, 2020b).

2.3. Social Media and its Influence on University Reputation

Social media has revolutionized the way universities interact with the public. The rapid rise of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, has provided universities with powerful tools for shaping their reputation and reaching a global audience (Liu & Shrum, 2015). Research by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) reveals that universities are increasingly using social media to share real-time information, promote their academic achievements, and engage in two-way communication with both internal and external audiences. Organizations increasingly use social media marketing to build consumer communications and interactions, enhance market penetration, improve stakeholder connections, and harness brand equity (Soares *et al.*, 2022). Universities' marketing

managers should prioritize growing user involvement on social media. Actionable features and university characteristics have been identified as key drivers of social media activity. Vibrant postings with photographs and appeals for contact receive many likes. Frequent updates and incentives for user interaction are also needed. Experiential, visual, personal, or exclusive communications are linked to much higher levels of online consumer engagement (Isaacs and Mulder, 2024; Lim and Rasul, 2022; Malika, 2024). Social media interactions such as reviews and recommendations are important for shaping students' perceptions and informing their enrollment decisions. Thus, social media marketing shapes institutional reputation through interactive engagement, reviews, and recommendations (Al-Dmour *et al.*, 2024; Barus, 2024).

Social media allows universities to present a more humanized image, encouraging engagement and interaction with potential students, faculty, and alumni. Recent studies suggest that institutions that effectively use social media to highlight their strengths, share success stories, and demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and global issues are more likely to enhance their reputation and build stronger brand loyalty (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Liu & Shrum, 2015). Moreover, social media enables universities to respond to issues in real-time, mitigating potential reputational crises by swiftly addressing public concerns and improving transparency (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014).

For instance, in Malaysia, the rapid rise of digital engagement has been noted, with universities using Twitter and Facebook to engage with local and international communities, highlight research breakthroughs, and position themselves as leaders in higher education (Saiful, 2020). Through these channels, universities can also attract prospective students by offering a glimpse into campus life, research opportunities, and academic culture, thus improving their visibility and global appeal. Media coverage is therefore a powerful way of shaping public perception of HEIs. Positive media exposure enhances visibility and prestige, whereas negative coverage can harm reputation.

2.4. Corporate Branding in Higher Education

Corporate branding has emerged as a crucial tool for higher education institutions in an era of globalization and increasing competition. As Abratt and Kleyn (2012) argue, corporate branding in higher education involves creating a distinctive brand identity that reflects the core values, mission, and vision of the institution. The process includes

communicating this identity consistently across all touchpoints, whether through institutional messaging, marketing campaigns, social media, or alumni relations.

According to Melewar and Saunders (2000), a strong brand can not only differentiate a university from its competitors but also communicate its unique contributions to society, such as research excellence, community engagement, and international partnerships. Universities with a clearly articulated and cohesive brand identity are more likely to attract high-caliber students, faculty, and external collaborators (Kapferer, 2012). In the context of higher education, reputation is built over a long period of understanding and evaluating its success. University reputation is linked to academic success, external performance, and emotional engagement (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023; Khoi *et al.*, 2019). In higher education, reputation plays an important role in determining perceived quality, reducing ambiguity for stakeholders, and shaping evaluations of key stakeholders such as students. However, given their vast number of stakeholders and high organizational complexity, HEIs continue to face reputation management challenges (Marelby and Fernando, 2022; Mendoza-Villafaina and Lopez-Mosquera, 2024; Wilson *et al.*, 2024). Universities in Malaysia are also increasingly investing in corporate branding strategies to elevate their standing in the global higher education sector. The factors of corporate reputation in HEIs from the employee's perspective have been insufficiently studied, and there is little available academic literature on this topic. Studies have established the importance of corporate reputation as an intangible asset in all types of organizations, including HEIs. However, a clear understanding of the antecedents and consequences of reputation is important so that HEIs can use it to their advantage (Rashid and Mustafa, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the corporate communication strategies employed by public universities in Malaysia to enhance their reputation. A qualitative approach was deemed suitable because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the communication practices, strategies, and perceptions of key university communication leaders.

3.1 Selection of Universities

The study focused on four public universities in Malaysia: Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Sultan

Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). These institutions were selected purposefully to represent different geographic regions of the country, ensuring a diverse representation of the university sector. This selection allowed for the exploration of how regional differences may influence corporate communication practices and reputation management strategies. Each of these universities is considered a significant player in the Malaysian higher education system, with a commitment to academic excellence, research, and social impact.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

In-depth Interviews

The primary data collection method involved conducting in-depth interviews with four directors and deputy directors of the Corporate Communication Departments at the selected universities. A semi-structured interview format was chosen because this research seeks to understand how corporate communication strategies are developed and implemented especially in public relations and reputation management. This format allowed for open-ended questions, providing the flexibility to explore the standard communication practices and the strategic thinking and decision-making processes behind them. It enabled the researcher to dive deeper into how these departments handle communication during critical moments, align their messaging with institutional values, and engage stakeholders effectively. The in-person interviews, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes, created a setting for more nuanced discussions. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy and completeness of data for further analysis of their communication approaches and strategies.

Secondary Data Collection

In addition to the interviews, secondary data was collected from various sources, including university publications, official websites, annual reports, and social media content. The secondary data helped contextualize the findings from the interviews and provided a broader view of the public image and communication strategies employed by the universities. This included examining how the universities portray themselves through digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, which are critical in shaping the modern reputation of academic institutions. Social media platforms, in particular, were useful for understanding how universities engage with their

stakeholders and build relationships with potential students, alumni, and the broader public.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis which involves identifying patterns, themes, and insights within the data. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is beneficial for examining complex, qualitative data, such as interview transcripts and secondary data, to uncover key themes related to corporate communication strategies, social media engagement, and reputation management.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were then coded to identify recurring themes. Thematic analysis was employed to examine the interview data collected from directors and deputy directors of Corporate Communication Units at public universities. The coding process began with multiple readings of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Significant statements related to university communication practices, stakeholder engagement, and reputation management were initially coded. Similar codes were then grouped into categories, which were further refined into overarching themes capturing patterns in how public universities manage and communicate their corporate reputation. The process was iterative to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the perspectives of university communication units, ultimately concluding the strategic communication practices employed by the universities.

3.4. Triangulation and Expert Validation

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, expert validation was an integral part of the research methodology. In this study, expert validation was conducted by consulting three experts in the field of public relations and corporate communication. These experts were selected based on their extensive experience and expertise in both academia and the professional practice of communication strategies. The criteria for the experts are having significant experience as a senior communication lecturer in a public university in Malaysia, having an industry background in public relations for more than 15 years and working in various sectors. This selection ensured a well-rounded perspective on the findings, bringing together both academic and practical viewpoints.

The primary role of these experts was to assess the alignment and accuracy of the themes identified in

the research, as well as to provide feedback on the interpretation of the data. After the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and secondary data, the key findings were presented to the experts for review. They were asked to critically evaluate whether the identified themes, categories, and conclusions were consistent with their own professional experiences and knowledge of current trends in university communication strategies.

The experts were provided with summaries of the data, including the themes related to corporate branding, social media usage, reputation management strategies, and leadership in corporate communication. They were also asked to provide input on any potential gaps or overlooked areas in the analysis. The experts' feedback was used to triangulate the data, ensuring that the study's conclusions were grounded in both empirical evidence and expert opinion.

One of the key contributions from the expert validation process was the identification of additional factors influencing corporate communication strategies that were not immediately apparent in the primary data. For instance, one expert emphasized the importance of leveraging niche areas of excellence, such as specific research strengths or unique academic programmes, as a powerful tool for building institutional reputation. Another expert highlighted the evolving role of strategic social media use, noting its potential not only for outreach but also for real-time engagement and brand positioning in an increasingly competitive digital environment.

Experts also pointed to the significance of media visibility, particularly in how universities can frame narratives in mainstream and alternative media to reinforce credibility and public trust. The role of internal communication was also emphasized, especially in aligning staff and academic leadership with the university's broader communication goals. Additionally, experts provided valuable insights into the challenges behind reputation building, such as managing online crises, addressing misinformation, and ensuring consistency across communication channels.

Importantly, the experts helped ensure that the study's conclusions were not overly shaped by the perspectives of the university communication officers alone, as the primary participants in the study were drawn exclusively from corporate communication offices. By incorporating expert viewpoints, the study gained a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of university communication practices, reducing the risk of

institutional bias. Feedback from the three experts was integrated into the final analysis, and the findings were revised to reflect their insights.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interviews, ensuring that they were fully aware of the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the participants' identities, and all interview data was stored securely. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by the institution's review board, and the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings of the study based on the data collected from in-depth interviews with the directors and deputy directors of corporate communication at the four selected Malaysian universities, which are Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The findings are categorized into several themes, including engaging niche for reputation building, social media engagement, media visibility, strengthening internal communication, and the challenges faced by the universities in managing their reputations.

Theme 1: Strategic Niche Showcasing

Analysis revealed that engaging in niche showcasing the image of public universities is not just a strategic plan. Yet, it is a must to ensure stakeholders are aware of their niche, especially internal stakeholders and the community. USM, for example, has positioned itself as a leader in sustainability and environmental research, focusing on areas like green technology and sustainable development. The university's EcoCampus initiative, which integrates sustainability into its operations, has garnered both national and international recognition for its contributions to environmental conservation (USM, 2023). This theme highlights the necessity for public universities to move beyond general strategic planning to actively "showcase" a specific institutional niche. This strategy serves to create a recognizable identity that aligns with national priorities and global benchmarks. For example, USM aims to position the university as a leader by integrating sustainability into operations

and student activities: “We showcase our image through major events at the university... always linking to sustainability. All events must be linked to sustainability” (CCO2).

Moreover, UPM utilizes *Heritage for Media Authority*, including agriculture, to become the primary source for media commentary on current national issues, such as food security: “When the media wants information about food security, they come here... because there is so much interest in agriculture” (CCO3). UTM utilizes international rankings (SDGs) and industry-specific outcomes to build trust with stakeholders: “The industry trusts us because... UTM is one of the biggest producers of such talent. That’s basically why we are number one” (CCO4). This approach aims to validate reputation through global ranking. Additionally, UniSZA utilizes values-based identity: “FlexS was developed to help students and staff... producing holistic graduates who are not only excellent in academics but also grounded in values” (UniSZA Data). This could be seen as an attempt to differentiate the institution through emotional resonance and holistic education.

Theme 2: Reputation Management via Social Media Engagement

One of the most prominent findings of this study is the increasing awareness and reliance on social media platforms as key tools for managing university reputation. All participants’ responses indicate that social media has become central to corporate communication strategies, enabling universities to engage with a wide array of stakeholders, including prospective students, alumni, faculty, and the general public. For instance, the director of corporate communication at USM mentioned, “Social media allows us to reach a global audience instantly. It’s an essential tool for building and maintaining our reputation, especially in this digital age”. This suggests that social media has shifted from an optional tool to a central component of corporate communication, with a specific focus on data-driven engagement and platform-specific content.

Another participant mentioned, “For UPM, right now, the most followed social media was still Facebook” (CCO2). This shows that Facebook remains the primary official channel due to its broad reach and capacity for long-form content. In addition, A tension exists between high-impact academic achievements and simple, relatable posts that garner more engagement. A participant argues, “Even when we post something that we consider impactful... it doesn’t get many likes... But if we just post a single

picture with a simple question like ‘How is everyone?’ That tends to get a lot of responses.” (CCO3). Moreover, universities utilize data-driven strategies on social media to analyze news coverage and adjust communication strategies in real-time. A participant proclaims, “Having this digital type of data is very important for us to know how to move forward and what strategies we need to implement” (CCO2). The platforms are also utilized to showcase the “behind-the-scenes” life of academics and junior staff: “I think we haven’t been telling enough stories about the other side of our lecturers... the struggles, the marking, the behind-the-scenes” (CCO3). The following table represents the social media followers of public universities in Malaysia.

Table 1: Social Media Followers of the Public Universities.

Social Media Account	UniSZA	UPM	USM	UTM
Facebook	146K	218K	277K	338K
Instagram	17.6K	33.9K	43K	49.2K
YouTube	1.98K	10.2K	7K	7.24K
TikTok	19.6K	12.9K	3.5K	8.6K
LinkedIn	2K	108K	99K	161K
X	3.7K	16.4K	8.7K	102.3K

The data presented in Table 1 shows that all the universities have a range of social media accounts. As discussed earlier, Facebook emerged as the most widely used platform for sharing information, resulting in the highest number of followers compared to other platforms. Facebook remains the most popular social media platform in Malaysia, with over 24 million active users as of 2024, making it a strategic tool for universities aiming to connect with both local and international communities (NapoleonCat, 2024).

Theme 3: Media Visibility and the Popular Academic

All informants and experts agreed that maintaining strong media visibility plays a key role in shaping and sustaining the reputation of public universities. To strengthen this presence, institutions can take proactive steps such as providing media training and equipping lecturers with the skills and confidence needed to participate in media interviews. Empowering academic staff to engage with the media not only enhances the university’s public profile but also positions them as credible voices in their fields. Most universities have taken these proactive steps, leading to increased visibility in mainstream media outlets. For example, one of the participants mentioned, “No one outside our circle really reads journal articles... the general public does

not engage with them" (CCO2). This indicates a shift from academic journals to popular media, encouraging lecturers to write for mainstream news outlets to reach the broader community. Additionally, the data shows that "The fastest person to come up to say yes to an interview will be the one who gets the slot, and will be the one who gets visibility" (CCO3/UPM Data). This argument indicates that visibility is often determined by the speed of the university's response to media inquiries.

Theme 4: Internal Brand and Advocacy Leadership

This theme emphasizes that a university's external reputation is a reflection of its internal communication climate and leadership philosophy. Employees are the best brand ambassadors. This phrase reflects a significant meaning and is crucial in enhancing and sustaining an organization's reputation. This aspect is particularly substantial for public universities, which must emphasize strengthening internal communication to remain competitive. With the increasing number of strategic initiatives to improve institutional rankings, employees frequently face extensive multitasking responsibilities, often leading to communication gaps and work strain. Building trust with both internal and external stakeholders is essential. In this sense, universities allocate financial resources for industry engagement. This approach allows academics to connect with industry and public stakeholders, strengthening academic and research collaborations. The deputy director of corporate communication at UTM explained: "We do not tell our staff/lecturers to focus solely on ranking. We focus on the quality of our work... which will eventually impact our ranking". This point indicates that a positive internal environment and scholarly excellence naturally drive external rankings.

Theme 5: Where Universities Struggle to Build Their Image

The Corporate Communication unit at public universities faces several challenges related to internal communication, which directly impact the university's efforts to manage its image and stakeholder engagement effectively. One key issue is the presence of conflicting expectations among internal stakeholders, particularly lecturers who may display demanding or bossy behaviour. These include insisting on specific media schedules or objecting to published content, such as unapproved photographs, often without a clear understanding of media practices. This disconnect often leads to

misunderstandings and inefficiencies between academic staff and communication professionals, particularly around matters of transparency and representation.

On the other hand, the data suggest difficulties in gathering information from various departments and aligning them with the corporate communication vision. For instance, UniSZA faces challenges in moving as a united team, as "CCoRM relies heavily on input from the PTJs" (UniSZA Data). At UPM, one of the biggest challenges is gathering facts and data from all the departments (PTJs) within the university: That's a huge problem also. Because data is scattered throughout the year. So that's why we have a data section here. But it just started. Data bank for the whole university, but it's really hard to get the data (CCO3/UPM Data). Furthermore, financial limitations restrict the unit's ability to secure paid media coverage, requiring them to depend on compelling stories and expert personalities to attract attention.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that for Malaysian public universities, strategic niche showcasing has evolved from a general planning exercise into an institutional necessity. By actively projecting a specific image, such as USM's focus on sustainability or UPM's authority in agriculture, these institutions move beyond generic academic goals to establish a recognizable identity that resonates with both national priorities and global benchmarks. This process of identity construction is well-documented as a core function of corporate branding in higher education (Kapferer, 2012; Melewar & Saunders, 2000). The data indicate that when universities, such as UTM, utilize industry-specific outcomes or UniSZA emphasizes values-based education, they are not merely disseminating information; they are attempting to build trust and emotional resonance with their stakeholders. This strategy ensures that the university's unique strengths are clearly visible to internal communities and the broader public institutions, creating a foundation for long-term institutional prestige.

A critical pillar of this reputation management is the strategic reliance on social media platforms, which have shifted from optional tools to central components of corporate communication. Among these, Facebook remains the most strategically significant channel in Malaysia, utilized by all four universities due to its vast reach and familiarity across diverse demographics (Muntinga et al., 2011; Statista, 2024). The platform's capacity for long-form

content and interactive features makes it ideal for reaching the more than 24 million active users in the country as of 2024 (NapoleonCat, 2024). Furthermore, the use of built-in audience analytics allows these universities to move toward data-driven engagement, monitoring post reach and user demographics to refine their content strategies (Jiang *et al.*, 2023). This digital stewardship enables universities to maintain a constant presence in the lives of prospective students, alumni, and the general public, effectively bridging the gap between the ivory tower and the digital community.

Complementing this digital presence is the pursuit of media visibility, where the role of the “popular academic” has become increasingly vital. The informants agreed that empowering lecturers to engage with mainstream media is essential, as the general public rarely interacts with academic journal articles. By providing media training and encouraging rapid responses to media inquiries, universities position their staff as credible and authoritative voices on current issues. This consistent coverage is a strategic move to ensure the institution appears as a thought leader in the public eye (Abdullah, 2022). For institutions like UPM, frequent media appearances serve as a form of public validation, signaling that the university’s mission has a tangible impact on society (Mohamad & Tan, 2023). This visibility transforms complex academic research into accessible public knowledge, reinforcing the university’s reputation as a relevant and responsive national asset.

The study further highlights that a university’s external image is fundamentally a reflection of its internal communication climate. Employees serve as the primary brand ambassadors, yet the increasing pressure of institutional rankings can lead to communication gaps and work strain. Although public universities operate within structured environments, they must cultivate robust internal communication to remain competitive (Ahmed *et al.*, 2023). This requires corporate communication units to thoughtfully design channels that maintain a favorable work climate, ensuring that sensitive information is handled with empathy rather than through impersonal emails (Men & Yue, 2019). Research confirms that employee satisfaction is significantly correlated with institutional performance outcomes, making consistent and empathetic communication a prerequisite for any successful reputation-building effort (Yue *et al.*, 2021).

Central to maintaining this internal and external balance is the role of leadership. The effectiveness of

corporate communication offices often depends on leaders who possess a blend of academic insight and industry experience (Avery, 2010). Such leaders are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the higher education setting, ensuring that institutional messaging remains consistent, credible, and resonant (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Furthermore, strong leadership is essential for aligning communication strategies with core institutional values (Cornelissen, 2017). This is particularly evident in leadership philosophies that prioritize high-quality outputs over mere ranking metrics, a strategy that naturally improves reputation without excessive, metric-centric investments (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2022). In times of crisis, the speed and decisiveness of leadership are also paramount in mitigating damage to the university’s brand and maintaining stakeholder trust (Avery, 2010).

Despite these strategic successes, the data reveal significant challenges, where universities struggle to manage their image. A primary issue is the presence of conflicting expectations among internal stakeholders, particularly academics who may lack a clear understanding of professional media practices. This can manifest as demanding behavior regarding media schedules or published content, reflecting a misalignment common in institutions with weak internal communication frameworks (Men & Yue, 2019). As noted by Welch (2020), effective internal communication requires a shared understanding of roles and goals across all levels. Without this alignment, the efforts of corporate communication professionals are often hampered by internal friction and a lack of cooperation from the very departments they are trying to promote.

Adding to these behavioral challenges is the systemic problem of data fragmentation. At universities like UPM and UniSZA, the communication units face difficulties in gathering facts and figures from various departments, as data is often scattered and unorganized throughout the year. The lack of a centralized data bank makes it difficult for the university to present a unified, evidence-based narrative to the public. Furthermore, financial limitations often restrict the ability of these units to secure paid media coverage, forcing them to rely on the inherent “newsworthiness” of their stories and the personal charisma of their experts. This scarcity of resources places an immense burden on the corporate communication team to continuously innovate and produce high-impact content with minimal financial backing.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that reputation management in Malaysian universities is a complex

exercise in balancing external visibility with internal cohesion. Success depends on the ability to translate academic achievements into relatable stories while simultaneously managing the internal stresses of a high-performance culture. While social media provides the platform and media visibility provides the authority, it is the internal alignment of staff and the strategic vision of leadership that provides the stability. Addressing the issue of data fragmentation and stakeholder conflict is crucial for these institutions to move toward a more integrated and coherent communication approach. By fostering a culture of internal brand advocacy and utilizing data-driven insights, Malaysian public universities can ensure their reputations are not only built on strategic planning but are sustained by authentic institutional excellence.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the corporate communication strategies employed by Malaysian public universities, focusing on the use of social media, corporate branding, and leadership to enhance university reputation. Key findings indicate that effective communication strategies significantly contribute to improving the visibility and stakeholder engagement of these institutions. The research highlights the importance of integrating digital platforms and consistent branding efforts in building a strong, positive reputation. These findings offer valuable insights into strengthening reputation management within the competitive higher education system. Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations, including the relatively narrow sample size confined to public universities and the exclusion of perspectives from other stakeholders such as students and alumni. Future research could expand the scope to include private institutions, as well as a broader array of stakeholders, to gain a more holistic understanding of corporate communication impacts. Additionally, investigating the influence of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality on university communication strategies could provide further insights. Comparative studies exploring how universities in different cultural and economic contexts manage their reputations will also enhance the generalizability of the findings and contribute to the development of more adaptive communication

frameworks.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature on corporate communication and reputation management by extending existing theories to the context of Malaysian public universities. The findings reinforce the theoretical linkage between strategic communication practices, corporate branding, and organisational reputation within higher education institutions. By highlighting the role of social media, leadership communication, and consistent branding in shaping stakeholder perceptions, the study supports and enriches reputation-based and corporate branding frameworks that emphasise sustained communication and identity coherence. Furthermore, the research adds empirical evidence from a public university setting, which has received less scholarly attention compared to corporate or private sector contexts. This contributes to a broader understanding of how reputation is constructed and maintained in the public sector, especially in higher education contexts.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for university leaders and corporate communication practitioners in Malaysian public universities. The study highlights the importance of utilising digital platforms, particularly social media, to enhance institutional visibility and foster stronger stakeholder engagement. The findings additionally revealed that the effectiveness of university communication units is strongly influenced by leadership, especially when individuals with relevant industry experience in communication and media are entrusted with directing these units. Consistent corporate branding emerges as a crucial tool for establishing and maintaining a positive university reputation. These insights can help develop more strategic and coordinated communication guidelines and practices within public universities, enabling them to compete more effectively in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape. Moreover, the findings can guide communication units in aligning branding efforts with institutional values and stakeholder expectations, thereby supporting long-term reputation management.

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