

Exploring Brand Reputation in Malaysian Polytechnics: The Role of Brand Identity, Public Relations Strategy, Social Media Influence, and Customer Perception

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Abstract

Brand reputation plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of educational institutions, particularly in the context of non-profit organizations such as Malaysian Polytechnics. This study aims to examine the relationship between brand identity, public relations strategy, social media influence, and customer perception in determining the brand reputation of Malaysian Polytechnics. A quantitative research method was employed; whereby structured questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 370 students. A total of 148 responses were collected and analysed using statistical techniques to assess the relationships between the independent variables and brand reputation. Descriptive analysis revealed that all factors scored highly (average score of 4 out of 5), indicating their strong association on brand reputation among students. Correlation analysis showed that all independent variables—brand identity, public relations strategy, social media influence, and customer perception—have a significant positive relationship with brand reputation. This study offers valuable insights for Malaysian Polytechnics to enhance their brand reputation by focusing on consistent brand identity, effective public relations, strategic social media engagement, and fostering positive customer perceptions. Furthermore, some suggestions for future research directions were discussed to guide continued efforts in strengthening institutional branding.

Keywords: *Brand reputation, brand identity, public relations strategy, social media influence, customer perception.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Managing brand reputation effectively requires a strategic approach that integrates both internal and external branding efforts. While traditional branding strategies have typically emphasized external image, they often overlook the significant role of employees in conveying brand authenticity (de Chernatony, 1999). Ensuring alignment between internal values and brand identity not only boosts brand credibility but also improves public perception and message consistency. In higher education, strong institutional branding can help reduce perceived uncertainties among potential students and enhance competitiveness (Beneke, 2011). However, coordinating various branding components can be complex and, if not managed well, may lead to inconsistencies that affect institutional trust.

Besides aligning internal and external branding, the rise of digital platforms introduces new challenges in managing brand reputation. Social media now plays a significant role in shaping how consumers view and trust a brand, making it essential for organisations to maintain a sincere and consistent online presence (Alves et al., 2024). While influencers can help boost brand visibility, they may also create doubt if their endorsements seem insincere (Shrivastava & Jain, 2022). In the context of higher education, digital branding should focus on brand culture, students' real-life experiences, and maintaining a consistent brand image. Research by Tengku Ahmad (2012) shows that brand culture has the most substantial effect on institutional reputation. Therefore, higher education institutions need to emphasise genuine digital interactions, not just superficial online exposure.

Developing a strong brand reputation involves more than just visual branding; it requires a comprehensive strategy that blends marketing, public relations, and internal communication efforts (Geldean, 2020). A successful brand must be built around a clear purpose and identity, supported by consistent stakeholder communication. It is important to distinguish between the roles of marketing and PR to ensure the brand is positioned effectively. In higher education, institutions face the challenge of maintaining academic values while engaging in commercial branding activities, raising ethical concerns about the increasing market influence on education (Erisher, Obert, & Frank, 2014). Organisations that manage their reputation through both digital and conventional approaches are more likely to adapt to market dynamics and preserve long-term brand strength.

Issues related to brand reputation are critical in higher educational institutions, as it impacts their ability to attract donors, collaborators, and prospective students (Bencke, 2011; Alves et al., 2024). Unlike profit-oriented organisations, non-profit institutions such as universities and polytechnics often struggle with limited resources, public accountability, and the need to align branding with their social mission (Shrivastava & Jain, 2022). These challenges make it difficult to position themselves competitively while remaining true to their values (Erisher et al., 2014). This research explores the main factors that shape brand reputation in the context of Malaysian polytechnics, offering a framework that considers brand identity, social media presence, public relations, and students' perception as key components for building a trustworthy institutional image.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the non-profit sector, brand encompasses the organization's identity, mission, and the perceptions stakeholders hold about it (Schaefer, 2023). Reputation, meanwhile, reflects the collective assessment of an organization's credibility, trustworthiness, and effectiveness. A strong brand can significantly enhance reputation, leading to greater support and resource acquisition (Schaefer, 2023). However, many non-profits resist branding strategies due to concerns about appearing overly commercial, which hampers efforts to build a cohesive brand identity (da Costa et al., 2022). Furthermore, limited financial and human resources restrict their capacity for professional marketing and branding, complicating reputation management.

Generally, brand reputation is a multifaceted construct that includes factors such as brand identity, public relations strategies, social media influence, and customer perception. However, brand reputation in public higher educational institutions is primarily shaped by key stakeholders, especially students. Keh and Xie (2009) found that an institution's reputation plays a significant role in its ability to attract and retain students, establish partnerships, and engage alumni. A positive reputation fosters trust and loyalty, which, in turn, drives enrolment rates and enhances institutional prestige (Keh & Xie, 2009). Additionally, reputation is influenced by students' perceptions of the quality of education, campus facilities, and faculty, all of which contribute to their overall view of the institution.

Previous studies have emphasized that brand identity is crucial in shaping a strong brand reputation. According to Aaker (1996), a consistent and clear brand identity builds brand equity and enhances customer trust towards the organization. Specifically, the brand identity of an institution, including its vision, mission, and values, plays a crucial role in shaping its brand reputation. Aaker (1996) further stated that a strong brand identity gives the institution a distinct presence and helps foster a deep emotional connection with stakeholders, especially students. Institutions that have a clear and consistent identity regarding their educational philosophy, mission, and values are more likely to attract students who align with those principles. Moreover, a well-crafted identity boosts the institution's emotional appeal, enhancing the public's trust and admiration. Recent research by Tariq and Rahman (2020) also suggests that social media presence helps shape brand identity, further contributing to a more solid and positive reputation.

Effectively, public relations (PR) strategies are essential for managing and enhancing an institution's brand reputation by shaping stakeholder perceptions through strategic communication. In higher education, PR efforts that emphasize academic achievements, research works, community outreach, and student successes contribute to building a positive image (Simoes & Dibb, 2001). Grunig and Hunt (1984) also highlighted that strong stakeholder relationships through PR can significantly influence public perception of the brand. Moreover, Azoury, Daou, and Khoury (2014) emphasized that aligning PR strategies with an institution's brand identity is crucial for strengthening brand reputation within the competitive higher education landscape. Thus, effective PR remains a vital tool for sustaining a positive institutional reputation.

Moreover, the impact of social media on brand reputation is undeniable in today's digital age, especially for public higher education institutions. Social media platforms provide a space for direct engagement with students, alumni, faculty, and potential applicants. The influence of social media marketing on brand reputation is well-documented; Albutra, Pomes, and Almagro (2022) demonstrated that efforts focusing on entertainment and interaction positively affect brand perception. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) further emphasized that positive interactions on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn can greatly enhance an institution's emotional appeal and the perception of its products and services. However, social media also presents risks, as negative feedback can quickly spread across platforms, potentially damaging an institution's reputation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Furthermore, customer perception plays a pivotal role in determining brand reputation. Albutra et al. (2022) identified that functional perception is the most significant factor influencing brand perception among customers. In the context of public higher education institutions, students' perceptions are essential in shaping brand reputation. Their experiences, particularly with teaching quality, campus facilities, and career services, directly affect their overall perception of the institution's reputation (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). As a result, managing student satisfaction is crucial for institutions seeking to maintain a positive brand image.

Table 1 below highlights the previous results focusing on brand reputation:

Table 1: Previous Results on Focused Factors related to Brand Reputation

Factor	Impact on Brand Reputation	Key Findings from Research	Authors
Brand Identity	Enhances credibility and distinctiveness	A consistent brand identity helps institutions differentiate themselves, build trust, and form emotional connections with students.	O'Sullivan et al. (2024)
Public Relations Strategy	Enhances trust and transparency	Effective PR efforts, including media relations and crisis communication, help maintain a positive institutional image and mitigate negative publicity.	Axios (2024)

Social Media Influence	Shapes public perception and engagement	Active, authentic engagement on social media enhances brand awareness, improves student perception, and fosters word-of-mouth marketing.	Perera et al. (2023)
Customer Perception (Students' Views)	Drives loyalty and advocacy	Students' experiences and perceptions significantly impact their willingness to recommend and advocate for the brand, influencing long-term reputation.	Shams et al. (2022)

This table provides a structured overview of how these factors interact with brand reputation in the context of organizations

In summary, maintaining a positive brand reputation in the non-profit sector requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both internal and external challenges. Organizations must overcome internal resistance to branding, invest in aligning their workforce with their brand values, and leverage digital platforms to communicate effectively with stakeholders. By proactively managing these aspects, non-profits can enhance their reputation, thereby securing the support necessary to fulfil their missions. A research framework is developed based on the above literature discussion. The framework for the study is shown as follows:

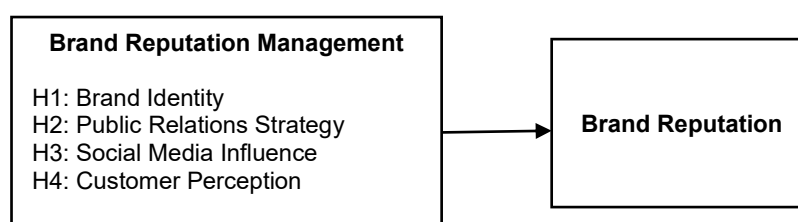


Figure 1: Research Framework

From the above research framework, it can be concluded that there are four hypotheses involved. These hypotheses examine the relationships between brand identity, public relations strategies, social media influence, and customer perception on brand reputation.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for this study is designed to investigate the relationship between brand identity, public relations strategies, social media influence, and student perception in shaping the brand reputation of Malaysian Polytechnics. The research design follows a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional survey method to collect data from students in related Malaysian Polytechnics. This approach is suitable for capturing students' perceptions and experiences within a specific period, allowing for statistical analysis to determine the relationships between the variables. A structured questionnaire is used as the primary data collection instrument to ensure consistency and reliability in responses. Data collection is conducted through an online survey, ensuring accessibility and ease of participation for students across different polytechnics. The questionnaire is distributed through official institutional channels, student organizations, and social media platforms to maximize response rates. The survey includes demographic questions, as well as Likert-scale items measuring brand identity, PR strategies, social media influence, student perception and brand reputation.

The population and sample for this study consist of students enrolled in four selected Malaysian Polytechnics. Those polytechnics were included Polytechnic Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (POLIMAS), Polytechnic Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, Selangor (PSA), Polytechnic Nilai,

Negeri Sembilan (PNS) and Polytechnic Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu (PKT). The size of 9,616 population from these four polytechnics includes students from various academic programs and levels to ensure a comprehensive understanding of brand perception across different groups. A stratified random sampling technique is employed to ensure a representative sample that reflects the diverse student body. The sample size of 370 is determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table to ensure statistical adequacy for hypothesis testing.

Measurement of variables is based on validated instruments adapted from previous studies in all variable's studies; include brand reputation (dependent variables) and brand identity, PR strategy, social media influence and customer perception (independent variables). These variables are measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) while all items were adapted from previous studies. For reliability of measurement, all constructs demonstrated excellent result, with Cronbach's alpha values above .80. Specifically, brand reputation (six items) achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .919, while brand identity (five items) recorded a Cronbach's alpha of .904. The construct of public relations strategy (five items) showed a Cronbach's alpha of .933 while social media influence (five items) produced a Cronbach's alpha of .891. Meanwhile, customer perception (five items) obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .925.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents was assessed based on several factors, including gender, field of study, polytechnic attended, knowledge of polytechnic existence, source of information, and the primary reason for choosing a polytechnic. For a detailed summary of the profile of respondents, refer to Table 2 below.

Table 2: Profile of Respondents (n=148)

Demographic	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78	52.7
	Female	70	47.3
Field of Study	Engineering & Technology	76	51.4
	Non-Engineering & Technology	72	48.6
Name of Polytechnic	POLIMAS	76	51.4
	PSA	39	26.4
	PNS	18	12.2
	PKT	15	10.1
Knowledge about the Existence of Polytechnic	Before Enrolment	116	78.4
	After Enrolment	32	21.6
Source of Information about Polytechnic	Social media	63	42.6
	Word of mouth	42	28.4
	Polytechnic website	14	9.5
	Education fair	25	16.9
	Others	4	2.7
Primary Reason for Choosing a Polytechnic	Affordable fee	70	47.3
	Reputation	4	2.7
	Program quality	39	26.4
	Location	27	18.2
	Friends' influence	6	4.1
	Others	2	1.4

Refer to the above table, there were 148 respondents involved including 78 male (52.7%) and 70 females (47.3%). In terms of field of study, most respondents were enrolled in Engineering and Technology (76 students, 51.4%). followed by Non-Engineering and Technology (72 students, 48.6%) The respondents were distributed across four polytechnics. The largest group attended POLIMAS (76 respondents, 51.4%), followed by PSA (39 respondents, 26.4%), PNS (18 respondents, 12.2%), and PKT (15 respondents, 10.1%).

Concerning the knowledge of polytechnic existence, the majority of students were aware of polytechnics before enrolling (116 students, 78.4%), while 32 students (21.6%) learned about polytechnics only after enrolling. As for the source of information about polytechnics, 63 students (42.6%) learned through social media, 42 students (28.4%) through word of mouth, 14 students (9.5%) through the polytechnic website, 25 students (16.9%) through education fairs, and 4 students (2.7%) through other means. Finally, the primary reasons for choosing a polytechnic were varied. The most common reason was affordable fees (70 students, 47.3%), followed by program quality (39 students, 26.4%) and reputation (4 students, 2.7%). Location was the reason for 27 students (18.2%), while friend influence (6 students, 4.1%) and other reasons (2 students, 1.7%) accounted for smaller numbers.

Analysis of Descriptive and Correlation

Descriptive statistics were conducted to summarize the mean scores and standard deviations for each construct. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Meanwhile, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the five key constructs; brand reputation, brand identity, public relations strategy, social media influence, and customer perception. For a detailed summary of the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, refer to Table 3 below.

Table 3: Analysis of Descriptive and Correlation

Factors	Mean	SD	BRP	BID	PRS	SMI	CPC
BRP - Brand Reputation	4.32	.662	1				
BID - Brand Identity	4.09	.719	.794**	1			
PRS - Public Relations Strategy	4.10	.786	.758**	.840**	1		
SMI - Social Media Influence	4.03	.770	.754**	.828**	.885**	1	
CPC - Customer Perception	4.25	.733	.804**	.770**	.796**	.844**	1

*Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

The results from descriptive analysis indicated that brand reputation had the highest mean score ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .662$), suggesting that respondents generally perceived the brand reputation of Malaysian Polytechnics very positively. Customer perception followed closely with a mean of 4.25 ($SD = .733$). Public relations strategy recorded a mean score of 4.10 ($SD = .786$), while brand identity showed a close mean score of 4.09 ($SD = .719$). Social media influence obtained the lowest mean score among the constructs, with a mean of 4.03 ($SD = .770$), although it still reflected a favourable perception overall. The descriptive results demonstrate that all constructs were rated positively, with mean scores above the midpoint of the scale, indicating strong agreement among respondents toward the respective aspects evaluated.

Meanwhile results from the correlation analysis demonstrated that all independent variables were positively and significantly correlated with brand reputation. Specifically, customer perception exhibited a very strong positive correlation with brand reputation ($r = 0.804$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, brand identity also showed a strong positive relationship with brand reputation ($r = 0.794$, $p < 0.01$). Public relations strategy was found to have a moderately strong positive correlation with brand reputation ($r =$

0.758, $p < 0.01$), while social media influence displayed a comparable positive association ($r = 0.754$, $p < 0.01$). All correlations were statistically significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed), indicating the critical role these factors play in shaping brand reputation. These results suggest that brand reputation is positively influenced by brand identity, public relations strategy, social media influence, and customer perception, with each construct contributing significantly to the overall reputation of the brand.

5.0 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The descriptive analysis indicates that students generally hold positive perceptions of all constructs related to brand reputation. Brand reputation was viewed most favourably, reflecting strong trust and satisfaction with the Polytechnic's image. Students also expressed positive views on customer perception, suggesting overall satisfaction with their educational experience and the quality of services provided. Brand identity and public relations strategy were perceived as strong and effective, indicating successful communication and consistent branding. Although social media influence was rated slightly lower, it was still seen as impactful and engaging. Overall, the results show that the Polytechnic's brand reputation is positively shaped by strong identity, effective public relations, influential social media presence, and positive student perceptions.

While the vital research objective focused on examining the relationship between brand identity, public relations strategy, social media influence, and customer perception with brand reputation. The correlation analysis revealed that all variables were positively and significantly related to brand reputation. Customer perception showed the strongest association, indicating that students' positive experiences greatly shape their view of the institution's reputation. Brand identity also demonstrated a strong relationship, highlighting the importance of a clear and consistent brand message. Public relations strategy and social media influence showed moderately strong positive correlations, suggesting that effective communication and digital engagement contribute meaningfully to brand reputation. Overall, these findings confirm that all four constructs play significant roles in shaping a strong and positive brand reputation.

The findings offer valuable insights into key factors influencing brand reputation in Malaysian Polytechnics. While all constructs; brand identity, public relations strategy, social media influence, and customer perception - showed significant positive relationships with brand reputation, customer perception emerged as the most impactful. This highlights the importance of delivering quality educational services and fostering positive student experiences. Institutions should focus on improving academic support, campus facilities, and student well-being to cultivate favourable perceptions and long-term loyalty.

The strong link between brand identity and brand reputation also suggests that a clearly defined and consistently communicated brand image is essential. Aligning institutional values and visuals with student expectations helps differentiate Polytechnics in a competitive landscape. Public relations strategy play a crucial role as well—transparent communication, media engagement, and proactive reputation management can strengthen public trust and institutional credibility. Moreover, social media influence underscores the growing importance of digital engagement. Polytechnics should invest in creating dynamic, interactive content to connect with students and promote a positive institutional image.

For future research, deeper investigation into the specific elements that shape customer perception is recommended, particularly focusing on how various aspects of the student experience—such as academic quality, support services, campus environment, and extracurricular involvement—influence overall brand reputation. Expanding the study to other types of higher education institutions, such as

universities or private colleges, and conducting cross-regional or international comparisons could offer broader insights into contextual differences. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data would enrich the understanding of students' perceptions. Additionally, longitudinal research could explore how changes in branding strategies impact reputation over time, while examining the long-term effects of brand reputation on student loyalty, retention, and advocacy would further support institutional branding efforts.

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