

From Likes to Prestige: Leveraging Social Media to Enhance University Image

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become highly influential in shaping the image and reputation of organizations, including universities. Ineffective management of these platforms can put a university's reputation at risk, but social media can offer substantial advantages when used strategically. Research indicates that universities with robust social media strategies are more adept at promoting their services, enhancing engagement with their audience, and expanding the reach of their communications. Previous research suggests that, while the presence on various platforms was high, the audience engagement level needed to be improved. It underscores the importance of establishing a social media presence, cultivating meaningful interactions, and fostering community. Social media is a powerful and effective way to promote their activities and thus significantly improve the education sector. This study explores how public universities can optimize their social media strategies to enhance their image and reputation. It involves a qualitative review of past and recent studies, combined with in-depth interviews with corporate communication officers from several public universities in Malaysia, including Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The study also incorporates validation from academic and industry experts in corporate communication to ensure the findings are robust and practical. Academic and industry experts in corporate communication then verified the data. The data obtained from interviews are then analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This study implies that universities can optimize the role of social media to enhance the university's image to its best level. The findings also reveal vital social media platforms commonly used by universities with varying purposes and scopes. Moreover, the results emphasize the importance of a customized approach to social media engagement. Public universities can enhance their reputation, foster meaningful connections, and increase their influence in a progressively digital landscape by utilizing strategies specific to each platform and creating personalized content that connects with a wide range of stakeholders.

Keywords: Social Media, Influencers, Image, Reputation

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a dynamic tool that offers abundant information, extensive networking opportunities, and easy user access. Higher education institutions increasingly leverage platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to engage audiences, increase awareness, and cost-effectively address budget constraints. [1] found a positive connection between students who follow their university on social media and their strong relationship with the institution. This suggests universities can build meaningful relationships with stakeholders by investing in social media communications [2]. Research also indicates that universities with well-planned social media strategies are better at promoting their programs, research, and campus events. Social media engagement metrics—likes, shares, comments, and follower growth—offer valuable insights into how effectively universities connect with their audience. However, previous research also shows that while many universities maintain a broad presence on social media, audience engagement is not always as strong as it could be [3]. According to [4], universities need to establish a presence and foster consistent, high-quality interactions with their communities.

Engaging with stakeholders through social media is essential because it creates a real-time, interactive platform for universities to directly communicate with students, faculty, alumni, prospective donors, and the public. Unlike

traditional media, social media allows two-way communication, enabling feedback, dialogue, and collaboration. By actively engaging, universities can reinforce their values, highlight accomplishments, and respond to public perceptions, all of which contribute to a more robust image and reputation. A "one-size-fits-all" strategy for social media engagement is insufficient, as various stakeholder groups—such as prospective students, current students, faculty, alumni, industry partners, and the local community—have distinct needs and interests [5]. Customizing messages for each group is vital for effective engagement. For instance, prospective students may prioritize information on campus tours and academic programs, while alumni might be more interested in university achievements and involvement opportunities updates. Universities can create stronger connections and improve overall engagement by delivering targeted messages that resonate with specific groups.

Social media is a powerful tool with significant impact when used strategically. While previous studies on social media integration in Malaysian higher education primarily focused on teaching and learning [6], [7], [8], and [9], this paper aims to investigate how universities strategically used their social media to enhance brand image and stakeholder engagement at four Malaysian public universities. Through this analysis, the paper offers insights into how universities can refine their engagement strategies to build trust with stakeholders, attract potential students, and cultivate a positive brand image.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Strategic Use of Social Media in Higher Education

Over the past decade, social media has become increasingly vital in higher education, with universities worldwide using platforms like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter to communicate their values and connect with stakeholders. By the early 2010s, U.S. colleges and universities were already leading in incorporating social media into their marketing and recruitment strategies, as noted by [10]. Using social media strategically enables institutions to establish a solid online presence, making it more accessible for prospective students, parents, and other stakeholders to find information about academic programs, research accomplishments, and campus life [11].

Social media plays a crucial role in university branding by allowing institutions to shape their public image and control the narrative surrounding their achievements and activities. Studies by [12] and [13] indicate that social media enhances brand recognition and reputation for universities, increases visibility within the competitive education sector, and attracts potential students [4]. By actively managing their social media presence, universities can distinguish themselves and stay relevant in today's digital landscape. As [14] highlighted, understanding which strategies and platforms are most effective in boosting a university's reputation remains an area for further exploration.

One of the significant ways social media improves a university's reputation is by enabling direct engagement with diverse stakeholder groups. These groups include prospective and current students, alumni, faculty, industry partners, parents, and the larger community. Social media provides a platform for two-way communication, where universities can hold conversations, address questions, and respond to concerns in real-time [15]. The value of engagement is reinforced by [16], while [17] and [18] suggest that more significant interaction between institutions and stakeholders directly strengthens reputation. Audiences that feel engaged are more likely to develop loyalty and advocacy for the institution, often sharing positive experiences or publicly supporting the university [19].

Social media platforms help universities connect more personally with their audience, making institutions feel more approachable and less formal. Tracking the effectiveness of social media engagement through various metrics is essential for assessing its influence on a university's reputation. Key metrics such as reach, engagement rates, follower growth, and sentiment analysis provide valuable feedback on how well a university's messages resonate with its audience. According to [20], [21], and [18], engagement is a crucial indicator of reputation management, reflecting the level of audience investment in the institution's content. Social media metrics also help universities determine which types of content work best on different platforms; for instance, Instagram's visual content might appeal more to prospective students, while LinkedIn might better engage alumni and industry partners. These metrics allow universities to fine-tune their communication strategies over time, ensuring continuous improvements in their reputation [22] [23].

B. Personalizing Communication for Every Stakeholder

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping a university's reputation, and it is important to tailor messages for different stakeholder groups. A "one-size-fits-all" approach to social media communication does not work, as various groups have other interests and needs. For example, current students may engage with content about campus events, student services, and academic opportunities, while prospective students are more interested in admissions, campus tours, and scholarships. Conversely, alumni may respond to stories of success, ways to contribute financially, or networking events. Universities that segment their messages and deliver relevant content for each group are more likely to engage audiences and improve their reputation [23].

This tailored approach also helps build long-term stakeholder relationships, increasing loyalty and support. Research has shown that universities that communicate regularly and meaningfully with alumni see higher financial contributions and greater involvement in volunteer activities [25]. Additionally, multimedia content like videos, images, and infographics is crucial for engagement [26]. Visual content tends to capture attention and is more likely to be shared than text-based posts. Video content, in particular, has a significant impact on user engagement. Videos highlighting campus life, student experiences, or academic achievements effectively create a positive image of the institution. The rise of short-form video platforms such as Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube provides new opportunities for universities to reach younger audiences. Studies have found that universities using multimedia content see higher engagement and improved sentiment, leading to a more substantial reputation [1][12].

C. University Success Begins with a Strong Reputation

Universities have faced increasing competition over the years, and with the growing trend of marketization, their reputations are now under scrutiny to maintain a competitive edge [27]. A positive reputation is crucial for attracting essential resources such as research funding, philanthropic donations, and talented faculty and staff [28]. It also plays a significant role in drawing and retaining high-quality students, as many prospective students consider reputation a key factor when choosing a university [29]. Additionally, a strong reputation based on academic excellence, research opportunities, robust student support services, and vibrant campus life can significantly influence enrollment figures and student diversity [28]. According to [30], a university's reputation is shaped by its education, research, and social engagement efforts. Research, in particular, is the most visible aspect of any academic institution and has become a primary driver of reputation.

This "reputation attribution" process is similar to the PageRank algorithm, developed by Pinski and Narin in 1976 and later used by Brin and Page in 1998 to rank web pages. PageRank measures the importance of entities within a network by assigning a score based on the frequency of citations and the reputation of those making the citations. This approach underscores the importance of tailoring marketing and public relations strategies, particularly on social media, to different audiences to enhance a university's overall reputation.

D. Related Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is a communication framework that explains why individuals actively seek out specific media and content to fulfil various psychological and social needs. While initially focused on traditional media like television and radio, UGT has been increasingly applied to digital and social media. The theory posits that people engage with media for different purposes, such as information, entertainment, social interaction, or personal identity. It suggests that users are more active in their content choices than passive consumers [31]. In the context of public universities, UGT is especially useful for analyzing social media strategies. By understanding the motivations of different stakeholders—such as prospective students, alumni, or faculty—universities can create tailored content that meets these needs, boosting engagement and enhancing their reputation. Social media platforms allow universities to share real-time updates, achievements, and relevant information with a broad audience, significantly improving their visibility. Regularly showcasing research, faculty expertise, and student accomplishments allows universities to highlight their contributions and values, thus enhancing their reputation. Research indicates that

social media visibility, especially on platforms like LinkedIn, is crucial in shaping institutional reputation by helping universities stand out and differentiate themselves in the competitive education sector [11].

Engagement fosters a sense of community and connection through actions like liking, sharing, commenting, or messaging. For universities, this interaction helps create a sense of belonging and trust among students, alumni, and faculty, further reinforcing their reputation. Responding to questions, posting relevant content, and addressing feedback shows a university's commitment to meeting the needs and interests of its community, ultimately strengthening its reputation and reliability.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employs a rigorous methodology to explore the evolving landscape of corporate communication within Malaysian universities, focusing on four institutions divided by zone: Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The four zones were purposely selected to ensure outcomes reflecting Malaysia's geographical diversity.

Data Collection

The research begins with a comprehensive document analysis of past and recent studies, establishing a robust conceptual framework that guides the inquiry. In addition to interviews, a document analysis will examine the universities' social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter). The document analysis helps identify patterns in content strategy, audience engagement, and reputation management practices. This foundational review helps identify key themes and trends in corporate communication, providing context for the following interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted with top management of corporate communication at each of the selected universities. This qualitative approach allows for rich, detailed insights into the practices, challenges, and strategies employed in corporate communication within higher education institutions. The choice of interviewing communication top management—who are directly involved in shaping and executing communication strategies—ensures that the data reflects the realities of the field [32]. To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, academic and industry experts in corporate communication were consulted to verify the data collected from interviews. This step enhances the study's reliability and provides a broader perspective on the nuances of corporate communication strategies in academia [33]. The interview process involved six informants. Four were top management of the corporate communication units at the respective universities; one was an academic expert in public relations, and one was an industry expert in the same field. The informants are labeled as CC01, CC02, CC03, CC04, AA05, and IE06. The identities of the informants were encrypted to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews are subsequently analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This analytical method allows for systematic categorization and interpretation of themes within the data, enabling meaningful conclusions about the practices and perceptions of corporate communication within the context of Malaysian higher education. The data from social media posts and engagement metrics were analyzed to identify trends in content strategy, frequency of posts, and audience engagement. Through this comprehensive approach, the study aims to contribute to understanding how corporate communication functions in Malaysian universities, highlighting best practices and areas for improvement.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

This study's findings are derived from an analysis of interviews with corporate communication directors from four public universities: Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). These insights are further complemented by document analysis of each university's social media activities and validation from academic and industry experts in corporate communication.

Table I: 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 the table is current as of October 2024. It reveals that all the universities have a range of social media accounts. Notably, Facebook emerged as the most widely used platform for sharing information, resulting in the highest number of followers compared to other channels. All four universities have developed comprehensive social media strategies, though there are apparent differences in their focus and implementation. These strategies are tailored to align with each university's primary goals and the needs of its stakeholders, highlighting the importance of careful planning to ensure consistency between institutional objectives and online presence.

UniSZA, as a comprehensive university, ensures its social media content reflects its broad academic and community-based identity, covering areas such as academics, welfare, research, and overall activities. On the other hand, USM's social media strategy prioritizes research visibility and internationalization, reinforcing its reputation as a leading research institution. The Corporate Communication Director at USM also emphasizes community engagement, mainly through their active Facebook presence, where they continuously track which types of posts drive the most engagement.

UPM, a research university focused on agriculture, uses social media to highlight its specialized expertise, ensuring its posts align with its identity. The university's emphasis on academic promotion and fostering a sense of community demonstrates how social media can unite different audience groups. According to CCo2, maintaining a connection between their niche and online content is crucial, with recent campaigns focusing on food security. Finally, UTM, focusing on technology and innovation, uses social media to reflect its identity as a technology-driven institution. This targeted approach helps UTM stand out in the competitive academic sector. The university's strategic communication unit stresses the importance of aligning social media content with its brand identity. In sum, each university's social media strategy is distinct, but all underscore the importance of aligning online content with the institution's core values and goals.

Analysis revealed that UGT's framework enables universities to tailor their content based on the diverse needs of their audience. For instance, prospective students. They seek information on academics, campus life, and career opportunities. By posting relevant, engaging content on Instagram and YouTube, universities can attract this group for updates on achievements and networking opportunities. Observation of the LinkedIn accounts of the four universities revealed that three of them are active and engaging on that platform, except for UniSZA. CCo1 stated that they know the need for that and will empower all social media platforms, given the unit's appropriate staff. LinkedIn is ideal for alumni, as it connects them with job opportunities, institutional accomplishments, and each other, enhancing their identity as part of a prestigious network. For TikTok, UniSZA has the highest number of followers on that. Informant stated that every post related to a community or unfortunate event received high engagement on TikTok. The patterns observed in these findings align with the practices of the other three universities, which also recognize that frequent posts help enhance their university's visibility. UTM has the most followers on both Facebook and Twitter, known as X. Different content needs to be posted on different social media platforms to suit the audience's needs, and doing so requires not just human power but also consumes a lot of time. Hence, by understanding these motivations, universities can craft a social media strategy that fulfils the needs of their audiences, thereby building a loyal community and a more substantial reputation.

Monitoring your Engagement Metrics

Another essential factor in social media management is how these universities monitor and adjust their strategies based on engagement metrics. A key finding is that all universities prioritize data-driven decisions and real-time interaction, but their execution differs in scope and scale. From measuring likes and comments, public universities are encouraged to do a comprehensive measurement, like analyzing and responding to the comments. According to industry experts, by doing this, universities will have better results and could be improved accordingly.

All four universities have adopted highly analytical approaches, using engagement metrics to make informed decisions about content adjustments. This demonstrates a more sophisticated use of social media tools, aligning with best practices in corporate communication where continuous performance reviews are essential for refining strategies. However, there are challenges in doing so. For UniSZA, the director mentioned that sometimes the comments received on their social media are left unresponsive due to a limited number of staff members being unable to do so. They have the staff but are already occupied with many other tasks. She added that soon, they will add new staff to handle their social media accounts actively.

Interestingly, in UPM, even though they have all of their social media accounts, Facebook remains the most active social networking site. Until now, Facebook has been considered the most official and reliable channel for disseminating official information compared to other social media platforms.

"at UPM, they have a media monitoring company to collect the statistics on how much news coverage you have today and put that into the right category, whether it is agriculture, medicine, engineering, etc. Having this digital type of data again it's data is essential for us to know how to move forward and what strategies we need to implement. If we don't have a strategic plan, we need to start planning it."

(Excerpts from CCo2)

CCo2 added, *"Hopefully, one day, that data unit will be able to do what these media monitoring companies are doing so we don't have to spend our money for extra parties anymore. But it's perfect to have this media monitoring. Because you can see people's sentiments, interests, and dislikes, from there, we can see what type of post you can do manually. If you don't have that much news, what type of post is getting more attention from people? What's the characteristic of those posts? And, of course, we want to increase those types of posts when we identify them. So we get more likes, more mentions, and then we see what type of post don't get attention"*.

USM strategies have different stories. They observed the top 10 universities in the world and how they do it.

"What we can see is they just use simple sentences. Harvard University, for example, has a lot of science stories to tell. So we try to adopt. Different from others, from once to twice a week. We can see that other universities have started doing what we do. So we have to do other things. We made videos like the Eidulfitri video and Chinese New Year—public waiting for this kind of posts from us"

(Excerpt from CCo4)

CCo4 added,

"Another day, another post. I post pictures related to students' activities, like sitting on the final exam and their leisure time, and it attracts comments from the public. We also try to post videos regarding academic research but do not receive feedback. But we have to make it creative. For example, we shoot at CEMACS, shoot the director while he is diving, and cannot shoot on the land; it is not attractive. Our main focus is Facebook, Instagram we cannot focus because of the workloads".

He also emphasizes that any posting must be in line with top management. He added, *"because they do not want to create any issues. In the end, they are the ones who need to answer to the Ministry. So, our creativity should be bonded by ethical guidelines as well."*

UTM also has its way of managing engagement. CCo3 mentioned,

"We want others to talk about us. There was a time, years ago, when we were trying to build our global reputation, we would go to industry and universities abroad because we wanted to work with them. So now, since last year, I think, maybe two years ago, I told my management, right now, I think it's time, high time, for people to talk about us. All praises to God, my Vice-Chancellor is indeed very engagement-driven. So, he engages with many universities, university presidents, and CEOs from various industries. So when he goes out and does all these engagements, they talk about it. On Twitter and LinkedIn, for instance, if he meets with an ambassador, look, they acknowledge UTM's existence, UTM's quality in that sense."

This critical analysis highlights that social media management must go beyond posting content; it requires careful attention to feedback, sentiment analysis, and audience needs. The ability to adapt and respond in real-time is a crucial indicator of social media success, particularly in handling crises or negative feedback, which several universities noted during the interviews. While monitoring engagement metrics is vital and typically done quantitatively, IE06 emphasized that corporate communication units must also qualitatively measure the comments and feedback. The informant mentioned *"what kind of comments they received and how to respond to the comments accordingly is essential to ensure meaningful engagement. Based on the observations, USM is highly engaged in responding to its stakeholder groups. For example, only some universities are active and have a LinkedIn account, but having one gives you visibility."*

Tailored messaging and stakeholder-focused approaches

One size does not fit all. This phrase should be the basis for all messaging plans in the corporate communication unit. Universities must adopt tailored messaging strategies to engage with different stakeholder groups effectively. Each university recognized the need to adapt its communication style, content, and platform use based on the stakeholder in question: Prospective students are primarily targeted via Instagram and YouTube, with visually engaging content focusing on campus life and student experiences. All four universities are trying to adopt this in their capacity and need full support from the top management. According to AA05 (2024), if the university manages to do this, it could be a massive success for the corporate communication unit, as they know it is essential. However, due to limited resources, it is still being discussed.

All four universities agreed that Facebook would become their official site to deliver official statements and share information around the campus. They post almost everything on Facebook and Instagram, with interactive content and timely updates on academic programs, events, and opportunities. However, findings showed that most students do not have Facebook accounts. They prefer TikTok and X when they want to search for updates. Therefore, it is crucial to know the audience of every single platform and direct the message to the right target group. A critical point that emerges here is that one-size-fits-all strategies do not work.

Leveraging Students as Social Media Advocates

While the initial findings focused on the strategic use of social media platforms and engagement metrics, a significant emerging trend across universities is using students as informal social media advocates. According to AA05 (2024), integrating the role of students as social media influencers is brilliant for promoting university visibility, especially in attracting prospective students. Though the universities did not officially engage influencers, they realized the power of students organically promoting the institution on their accounts. This advocacy plays a significant role in enhancing the university's image, especially among prospective students.

[34] defined social media influencers (SMI) as third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web. They have the power to sway opinions and behaviours [35] and can generate income from their influence [36]. SMI are categorized based on their follower count into micro-influencers (fewer than 100,000 followers), macro-influencers (between 100,000 and 1 million followers), and mega-influencers (more than 1 million followers) [34] & [37].

Gen Z has the highest number of social media users pursuing higher education [38]. With the right skills and content, they can quickly become SMI. They will become a valuable asset in promoting the university's brand image with the right strategies and ingredients. AA05 (2024) stressed that *"...bear in mind, these students influencer should be mould, received proper training and materials so that the content does not contradict with university image and niche. Language usage and ethics should be the main concern if universities are serious about doing this."* According to academic experts, it would be a good thing for universities to be able to do this as social media influencers; they also act as digital opinion leaders and participate in self-presentation on social media. They form an identity by creating an online image using a rich multimodal narrative of their everyday personal lives to attract many followers.

Visual Communication is the key

Content creation and visual storytelling are other aspects that need further development, as people are more attracted to visuals than text documents. That is why visual content should be compelling enough to communicate the message to the audience. People in the corporate communication department should create creative visual content with every story they post on their social media accounts. Visual images are powerful tools for delivering a message as they suggest reality, create causal relationships, and foster interaction [39]. The saying a picture speaks louder than words is more accurate if the right angle is placed. These creative skills can be learned by attending professional workshops and being ready to invest in social media platforms, as suggested by [40], to ensure effective communication with their target audiences. Incorporating charts and infographics among the applicable ways of delivering a message, especially a complex one. In our experience, conveying information through visuals significantly increases an individual's understanding and retention. Visual messages assist in terms of not knowing to understand the message entirely.

CONCLUSION

Social media platforms allow universities to connect and build relationships with various stakeholders. Future research on social media should go beyond how universities can use social media to enhance and leverage the university's reputation. It should explore engagement strategies' role in shaping public perception and enhancing universities' reputations. Another interesting angle to study is how social media in different regions has been utilized to promote sustainable goal development (SDG) to measure a university's reputation.

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