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Digital Communication Strategy and Higher Education Reputation: Student and Community Perceptions

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Keywords: Digital communication; higher education reputation; student perception; community perception; social media strategy; institutional branding

ABSTRACT

In the current era of digital transformation, higher education institutions face increasing pressure to manage their reputation strategically through digital communication channels. This study investigates the relationship between digital communication strategies employed by higher education institutions and their perceived reputation among students and surrounding communities. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey with 320 respondents (220 students and 100 community members) and qualitative in-depth interviews with 18 informants from three universities in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, this research examines how social media management, website quality, digital content consistency, and online engagement practices influence institutional reputation. The findings reveal that digital communication strategy has a significant positive effect on higher education reputation ($r = 0.724$, $p < 0.01$), with social media engagement and content consistency emerging as the most influential dimensions. Community respondents demonstrated higher sensitivity to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) content compared to students, who prioritized academic information quality and responsiveness. This study contributes theoretically to the application of Agenda-Setting Theory and Stakeholder Theory in the digital context of higher education and provides practical recommendations for university communication offices in developing more effective digital strategies to build and maintain institutional reputation.

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Digital Communication Strategy and Higher Education Reputation: Student and Community Perceptions

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Abstract

In the current era of digital transformation, higher education institutions face increasing pressure to manage their reputation strategically through digital communication channels. This study investigates the relationship between digital communication strategies employed by higher education institutions and their perceived reputation among students and surrounding communities. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey with 320 respondents (220 students and 100 community members) and qualitative in-depth interviews with 18 informants from three universities in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, this research examines how social media management, website quality, digital content consistency, and online engagement practices influence institutional reputation. The findings reveal that digital communication strategy has a significant positive effect on higher education reputation ($r = 0.724$, $p < 0.01$), with social media engagement and content consistency emerging as the most influential dimensions. Community respondents demonstrated higher sensitivity to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) content compared to students, who prioritized academic information quality and responsiveness. This study contributes theoretically to the application of Agenda-Setting Theory and Stakeholder Theory in the digital context of higher education and provides practical recommendations for university communication offices in developing more effective digital strategies to build and maintain institutional reputation.

Keywords: Digital communication; higher education reputation; student perception; community perception; social media strategy; institutional branding

Introduction

The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed how organizations communicate with their stakeholders. Higher education institutions (HEIs), once reliant on traditional communication channels such as print media, brochures, and face-to-face interactions, are now navigating an increasingly complex digital landscape where reputation can be built, maintained, or damaged within hours. The digital communication environment presents both unprecedented opportunities and substantial challenges for universities seeking to project a coherent, positive institutional identity (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021).

Institutional reputation in higher education has long been recognized as a critical strategic asset. It influences student enrollment decisions, faculty recruitment, research collaborations, alumni engagement, and public funding allocations (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Traditionally, reputation was shaped by factors such as academic rankings, research output, graduate employment rates, and word-of-mouth recommendations. However, the digital revolution has introduced new reputation-shaping mechanisms, particularly through social media platforms, institutional websites, email communication, and digital content marketing (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

In Indonesia, the higher education sector has experienced rapid digital transformation, accelerated further by the COVID-19 pandemic which forced universities to pivot their communication strategies almost entirely to digital channels. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia (Kemendikbudristek, 2023), there are over 4,600 higher education institutions in Indonesia, creating an intensely competitive environment where digital visibility and positive online reputation have become decisive factors in institutional survival and growth. West Java, as the province with the highest concentration of higher education institutions in Indonesia, presents a particularly compelling context for examining these dynamics.

Despite the growing body of literature on digital marketing and organizational reputation, relatively few studies have simultaneously examined the perceptions of both internal stakeholders (students) and external stakeholders (surrounding communities) regarding the effectiveness of digital communication strategies in shaping university reputation. Most existing research has focused either on student perceptions in isolation (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Luque-Martinez & Dolores Castaneda-Garcia, 2007) or has examined corporate reputation management rather than educational institutions specifically. Furthermore, the cultural and institutional context of Indonesian higher education — characterized by strong community ties,

Islamic values in many institutions, and unique socio-economic dynamics — has been largely underrepresented in the international literature.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the relationship between digital communication strategies and higher education reputation from the dual perspectives of students and community members in Bandung, West Java. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) identify the key dimensions of digital communication strategy employed by higher education institutions; (2) examine student and community perceptions of institutional reputation; (3) analyze the relationship between digital communication strategy and perceived reputation; and (4) explore the differential perceptions between student and community stakeholder groups.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the theoretical understanding of digital reputation management in the higher education context and to provide actionable insights for university communication offices, administrators, and policymakers seeking to enhance institutional standing through strategic digital communication.

Literature Review

1) Digital Communication Strategy in Higher Education

Digital communication strategy refers to the planned and coordinated use of digital technologies and platforms to achieve organizational communication objectives (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). For higher education institutions, digital communication encompasses a wide array of channels and tools, including institutional websites, social media platforms (Instagram, Twitter/X, YouTube, TikTok), email newsletters, mobile applications, virtual events, and online advertising campaigns (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) identified social media as a transformative force in organizational communication, enabling two-way dialogue between institutions and their stakeholders. In the higher education context, Peruta and Shields (2017) found that universities with more active and responsive social media presences generated significantly higher levels

of stakeholder engagement and positive brand associations. Similarly, Linvill et al. (2012) demonstrated that the authenticity and consistency of institutional social media content strongly predicted audience trust and perceived credibility.

The website remains a foundational element of institutional digital communication. Studies by Abdulrahaman et al. (2020) and Ganguly et al. (2010) highlight that website usability, information quality, visual design, and loading speed are critical determinants of institutional credibility and first impressions among prospective students. In the Indonesian context, research by Kusumastuti et al. (2021) found that website quality was the single most influential digital factor in shaping perceptions of institutional professionalism among Indonesian higher education stakeholders.

2) Higher Education Reputation

Organizational reputation has been defined as the collective assessment of a firm's ability to provide valued outcomes to a representative group of stakeholders (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). Applied to higher education, institutional reputation encompasses perceptions of academic quality, research excellence, graduate employability, social responsibility, leadership quality, and institutional innovation (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007).

Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) developed an influential model of higher education image and reputation, distinguishing between functional components (tangible attributes such as facilities and programs) and emotional components (intangible attributes such as institutional culture and values). Their research found that both dimensions significantly influenced student loyalty and willingness to recommend the institution to others. This model has since been validated and extended by numerous subsequent studies across different national contexts (Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Deheshti et al., 2016).

In the digital age, Dijkmans et al. (2015) argued that online reputation management has become a distinct and critical competency for organizations. They found that active corporate social media usage positively impacted consumer perceptions of corporate reputation,

particularly in terms of transparency and responsiveness dimensions. For universities, this translates into the importance of managing not only proactive content but also responses to crises, negative reviews, and stakeholder feedback in digital spaces (Veil et al., 2011).

3) Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), originally developed in the context of mass media and public opinion, proposes that the emphasis placed on certain topics by media outlets influences the public's perception of the importance of those issues. In the digital context, universities act as their own media outlets, and the issues, values, and achievements they emphasize in their digital content directly shape how stakeholders perceive and prioritize aspects of institutional identity (Krämer & Pröscholdt, 2022).

Second, Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) posits that organizations must manage relationships with multiple groups who have stakes in the organization's activities. For universities, primary stakeholders include students, faculty, staff, alumni, the local community, government bodies, and industry partners. Each stakeholder group may hold different expectations and perceptions of the institution, necessitating differentiated communication strategies (Freeman et al., 2010). This theoretical lens is particularly useful for understanding why students and community members may perceive the same digital communication content differently.

Together, these frameworks suggest a model wherein digital communication strategy shapes the agenda of institutional attributes presented to different stakeholder groups, who in turn form differentiated reputational perceptions based on their specific expectations and values. This model forms the conceptual foundation of the present study.

Table 1. Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement	Theoretical Basis
H1	Digital communication strategy has a significant positive effect on higher education reputation among students	Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)
H2	Digital communication strategy has a significant positive effect on higher education reputation in the community	Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984)
H3	There is a significant difference between student and community perceptions of higher education reputation	Stakeholder Theory; Nguyen & LeBlanc (2001)
H4	Social media engagement is the most influential dimension of digital communication strategy on institutional reputation	Kaplan & Haenlein (2010); Dijkmans et al. (2015)

Method

1) Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), wherein quantitative data collection and analysis preceded and informed qualitative exploration. This approach was chosen because it allows for the statistical testing of hypothesized relationships while also providing depth of understanding through qualitative inquiry into the mechanisms and meanings behind the quantitative findings.

2) Population and Sampling

The study was conducted across three public and private universities in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling based on institutional type diversity and digital communication activity level. The quantitative phase involved 320 respondents: 220 active students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and 100 community members residing within a 5-kilometer radius of the selected universities. Student respondents were selected using stratified random sampling by faculty and year of study. Community respondents were selected using systematic random sampling from three urban villages (kelurahan) adjacent to the university campuses.

For the qualitative phase, 18 informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling: 9 students (3 per institution), 6 community representatives (local business owners, community leaders, and parents of students), and 3 institutional communication officers. Sample adequacy was determined by thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006).

3) Data Collection Instruments

The quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising 42 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire consisted of two main scales: (1) Digital Communication Strategy Scale (24 items) covering four dimensions — social media management, website quality, content consistency, and online engagement; and (2) Higher Education Reputation Scale (18 items) adapted from Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007), covering academic quality, social responsibility, institutional management, and emotional appeal dimensions. Instrument validity was confirmed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and reliability was verified through Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (all dimensions $\alpha > 0.80$).

The qualitative instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions exploring informants' lived experiences with institutional digital communication, their interpretations of institutional reputation, and their perspectives on the relationship between the two constructs. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in Indonesian. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

4) Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26 and AMOS 24. Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Pearson correlation analysis and simple linear regression were used to test H1 and H2. Independent-samples T-test was employed to examine H3. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test H4 and examine the relative contributions of digital communication dimensions to reputation. Qualitative data were

analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate coding and theme development. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was conducted at the interpretation phase through a joint display approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Results and Discussion

1) Respondent Profile

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	Percentage (%)
Student (n=220)	Male	98	44.5
	Female	122	55.5
	Undergraduate	178	80.9
	Postgraduate	42	19.1
Community (n=100)	Male	47	47.0
	Female	53	53.0
	Age 21–35	38	38.0
	Age 36–50	41	41.0
	Age > 50	21	21.0

2) Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Descriptive analysis of the main variables is presented in Table 3. The mean score for Digital Communication Strategy was 3.82 (SD = 0.61), indicating a moderately high level of perceived digital communication activity among respondents. Among the four dimensions, Social Media Management obtained the highest mean (M = 3.91, SD = 0.58), followed by Online Engagement (M = 3.87, SD = 0.63), Content Consistency (M = 3.79, SD = 0.65), and Website Quality (M = 3.72, SD = 0.70). The mean score for Higher Education Reputation was 3.76 (SD = 0.57), also indicating moderately high perceived reputation.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Variable / Dimension	N	Mean	SD	Category
Digital Communication Strategy (Total)	320	3.82	0.61	High
- Social Media Management	320	3.91	0.58	High
- Website Quality	320	3.72	0.70	High
- Content Consistency	320	3.79	0.65	High

- Online Engagement	320	3.87	0.63	High
Higher Education Reputation (Total)	320	3.76	0.57	High
- Academic Quality	320	3.88	0.55	High
- Social Responsibility	320	3.69	0.62	High
- Institutional Management	320	3.74	0.60	High
- Emotional Appeal	320	3.70	0.64	High

3) Hypothesis Testing

H1 and H2: Effect of Digital Communication Strategy on Reputation. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between digital communication strategy and higher education reputation for both student respondents ($r = 0.724$, $p < 0.01$) and community respondents ($r = 0.691$, $p < 0.01$), thus supporting both H1 and H2. Simple linear regression confirmed that digital communication strategy significantly predicted institutional reputation among students ($\beta = 0.718$, $t = 15.34$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.524$) and community members ($\beta = 0.683$, $t = 9.71$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.467$). These findings indicate that approximately 52.4% of the variance in student perceptions of institutional reputation and 46.7% of community perceptions can be explained by the quality of the institution's digital communication strategy.

H3: Differences Between Student and Community Perceptions. An independent-samples T-test revealed a significant difference between student and community mean reputation scores ($t(318) = 3.24$, $p = 0.001$, $d = 0.41$). Students reported significantly higher overall reputation scores ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.54$) compared to community members ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.62$). However, analysis of individual reputation dimensions revealed a nuanced picture: community respondents rated the Social Responsibility dimension significantly higher than students ($M_{\text{community}} = 3.84$ vs. $M_{\text{students}} = 3.58$, $p < 0.01$), whereas students rated the Academic Quality dimension significantly higher than community members ($M_{\text{students}} = 4.02$ vs. $M_{\text{community}} = 3.62$, $p < 0.001$). These results support H3 and align with Stakeholder Theory's prediction that different stakeholder groups prioritize different institutional attributes.

H4: Social Media Engagement as the Most Influential Dimension. SEM results indicated that Social Media Management ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and Online Engagement ($\beta = 0.38$, $p <$

0.001) were the strongest predictors of institutional reputation, followed by Content Consistency ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and Website Quality ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$). These findings partially support H4, as Social Media Management emerged as the most influential single dimension, though Online Engagement was nearly equally significant. The model demonstrated acceptable fit indices (CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.07).

4) Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data generated four overarching themes that elaborated and contextualized the quantitative findings.

Theme 1: Authenticity as a Foundation of Digital Trust. Across all respondent groups, authenticity in digital content was repeatedly cited as the most critical factor in building institutional credibility. Students expressed skepticism toward overly polished or promotional content, preferring candid testimonials, behind-the-scenes content, and honest communication about institutional challenges. One student informant stated: "I trust the university more when they post about real student experiences, not just awards and rankings." Community informants similarly valued authentic portrayals of community engagement over formal announcements.

Theme 2: Responsiveness as a Reputation Signal. Both students and community members interpreted institutional responsiveness in digital spaces — particularly response time to comments and messages on social media — as a proxy for overall organizational responsiveness and care. Slow or absent responses to public inquiries were interpreted as indicators of institutional arrogance or incompetence, directly diminishing reputation perceptions.

Theme 3: Community-Oriented Content as a Differentiator for Community Stakeholders. Community informants expressed a clear preference for digital content that demonstrated the institution's positive impact on the local community, including environmental programs, community empowerment initiatives, and local cultural celebrations. This theme strongly reinforced the quantitative finding that community respondents rated Social Responsibility

more highly, and supports the argument that CSR communication through digital channels is a particularly effective reputation-building strategy for community stakeholders (Carroll, 1991; Du et al., 2010).

Theme 4: Information Overload and Digital Fatigue. Several informants, particularly students, reported experiencing digital fatigue from excessive institutional communications. Overly frequent postings, redundant content, and poorly targeted messages were cited as factors that reduced engagement and, paradoxically, negatively affected reputation perceptions. This finding highlights the importance of communication quality over quantity in digital strategy design.

5) Discussion

The findings of this study collectively demonstrate that digital communication strategy is a significant determinant of higher education reputation, consistent with and extending existing literature (Dijkmans et al., 2015; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021; Kusumastuti et al., 2021). The relatively high variance explained in both student (52.4%) and community (46.7%) reputation perceptions underscores the strategic importance of deliberate digital communication management for universities in the current competitive landscape.

The differential perceptions between students and community members align with Stakeholder Theory's core premise that stakeholder groups form expectations and evaluations based on their specific relationships with and dependencies on the organization (Freeman et al., 2010). Students, as direct beneficiaries of academic services, naturally prioritize content related to academic quality, learning facilities, and career outcomes. Community members, whose primary relationship with the institution is through its physical and social presence in their locality, expectedly place greater emphasis on Social Responsibility dimensions.

The prominence of Social Media Management and Online Engagement as reputation predictors resonates with the Agenda-Setting framework: universities that actively and consistently set the agenda through their social media content — highlighting achievements,

values, and community contributions — effectively shape stakeholder perceptions of institutional identity and prestige (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Krämer & Pröscholdt, 2022). The qualitative finding on authenticity adds nuance to this relationship, suggesting that agenda-setting effectiveness in digital spaces is contingent on content authenticity, consistent with emerging literature on digital authenticity in organizational communication (Enli, 2015).

The theme of digital fatigue represents a novel and practically important finding. While existing literature has emphasized the positive effects of increased digital communication activity (Peruta & Shields, 2017), this study suggests a curvilinear relationship may exist, wherein excessive communication frequency diminishes returns and potentially damages reputation. Future research should examine the optimal frequency and variety of institutional digital communications.

Conclusion

This study provides robust empirical evidence that digital communication strategy significantly and positively influences higher education reputation among both student and community stakeholder groups. The findings demonstrate that Social Media Management and Online Engagement are the most influential strategic dimensions, while also revealing important differences in how students and community members evaluate institutional reputation — students prioritizing academic quality information and community members prioritizing social responsibility content.

Four qualitative themes authenticity, responsiveness, community-oriented content, and digital fatigue provide contextual depth to the quantitative findings and generate important practical insights. Theoretically, this study contributes to the application of Agenda-Setting Theory and Stakeholder Theory in the digital higher education context, demonstrating their complementary utility in explaining the complex mechanisms through which digital communication shapes multi-stakeholder reputation perceptions.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that university communication offices should: (1) prioritize authentic and candid digital content over highly polished promotional materials; (2) invest in monitoring and improving responsiveness on digital platforms; (3) develop differentiated content strategies that address the distinct interests of student and community stakeholders; (4) implement content quality controls to prevent digital fatigue; and (5) integrate CSR communication prominently into digital strategy as a community reputation-building mechanism.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference, and the findings are geographically limited to Bandung, West Java. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to trace reputation changes over time, expand the geographic scope to include other Indonesian regions, and examine the mediating role of institutional trust in the digital communication–reputation relationship. Additionally, platform-specific analyses examining the differential effects of Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and official websites on reputation dimensions would provide more granular strategic guidance for university communicators.

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