

The Influence of Digital Communication Activities on Brand Image and Brand Trust in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract. This study explores how digital communication activities impact brand image and brand trust within higher education institutions. Drawing on theories of branding, relationship marketing, and digital communication, the research proposes a model where Online Public Relations (E-PR), website communication, and social media communication shape brand image, which in turn affects brand trust. Data collected from university students were analyzed using reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and regression analysis. The findings indicate that all three dimensions of digital communication positively influence brand image, and that brand image, in turn, significantly enhances brand trust. This study contributes to the existing literature on higher education branding and offers practical insights for universities aiming to improve their competitiveness in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital marketing, E-PR, Brandimage, brand trust.

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I. Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly anticipated to engage continuously with a diverse range of stakeholders, including prospective students, current students, parents, alums, employers, and the broader community. As a result, digital communication channels—such as websites, social media platforms, and online public relations—play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions among these audiences. A well-crafted institutional brand can significantly influence enrollment decisions, foster stakeholder loyalty, and support long-term organizational sustainability. The advantages of digital communication are considerable, offering flexibility and convenience through broad access to information, interactive platforms and opportunities for online engagement. Additionally, online learning resources and e-learning platforms offer learners flexible educational options. Digital advertising, social media engagement, and email marketing are effective avenues for reaching target audiences. Moreover, the creative possibilities offered by diverse content formats, including images, videos, applications, and games, enrich the communication experience. The ability to monitor and gather immediate user feedback allows organizations to swiftly refine their strategies, while fostering online communities creates an environment conducive to information exchange and collaboration.

In this context, universities have effectively utilized digital communication as a strategic tool for brand promotion and information dissemination, focusing on online public relations (Online PR), website communication (Website_WEB), and public relations efforts that significantly enhance brand image. Online PR uses digital platforms to cultivate and enhance an institution's reputation and public awareness. This is achievable through a blend of methods, including building relationships with influencers, online journalists, and bloggers. By leveraging a robust network in the digital space, institutions can secure valuable content marketing opportunities, social media mentions, and link-building opportunities. This heightened visibility empowers PR agencies to craft highly targeted digital marketing campaigns that resonate with their desired audiences (Claire Beaumont, 2020). Social media, as a collective of online applications and platforms, is designed to facilitate interaction, collaboration, and content sharing. A thoughtfully designed university website can effectively convey the institution's image and reputation (Melewar et al., 2017).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of digital communication, empirical evidence on its effects on brand image and brand trust in higher education remains limited, particularly in developing regions. The current research landscape on communication and its application through digital platforms raises two significant issues. First, contemporary studies examining the relationship between communication activities and brand image or brand trust in higher education tend to assess these factors in isolation, resulting in a fragmented perspective. Second, the exploration of communication in education—especially regarding digital communication

methods such as Online PR, digital advertising, and social media communication—requires further investigation from the perspective of students, who constitute an integral internal demographic of the institution. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the contributions of Online PR, website communication, and social media communication to enhancing brand image and brand trust in higher education institutions.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Brand communication through digital platforms

Online marketing communication is often understood as a collection of activities rooted in the Web 2.0 paradigm that facilitate the creation and exchange of content between users and target audiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This form of communication provides valuable information about products, organizations, and brands to specific groups through online channels.

The research conducted by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) underscores the importance of fostering brand trust and brand affection as essential elements in encouraging brand loyalty. Furthermore, their findings point to the value of developing engaging, relevant, and targeted content to maintain strong connections with students and followers, thereby supporting branding and recruitment initiatives.

In addition, the study by Chinomona (2016) highlights the need to emphasize three fundamental components: brand communication, brand trust, and brand image. By focusing on these aspects, organizations can effectively attract and retain loyal customers, which in turn may enhance revenue and expand market share.

2.2 Research hypotheses

The relationship between Online Public Relations (E-PR) and Brand Image

In their study, Abdul Basit et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of various online activities, such as press releases, email communications, and social media interactions—including forum discussions and electronic news articles—in significantly positively influencing brand image. Their simultaneous tests yielded results suggesting that public information accessible on websites and online search engines like Google and Yahoo, as well as activities related to online press releases, automatic email responses, and public relations content shared on social media, can have meaningful effects on brand image, irrespective of whether the feedback is positive or negative. This finding supports Onggo's (2004) ONLINE PR theory, which asserts that the Internet is a valuable tool for fostering relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. Consequently, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H1: Online PR activities positively influence brand image

The relationship between Website Communication and Brand Image

A thoughtfully designed university website—characterized by an intuitive interface, appropriate applications, and engaging content presentation—can significantly influence the brand image and reputation of the institution, particularly through the value co-creation behaviors of students. As students become more attached to their university, there tends to be a corresponding enhancement of the university's brand image and reputation (Hafeez & Aburawi, 2013; Kabadayi & Gupta, 2011).

For a website to be effective, it is essential that it offers useful, relevant, and easily searchable information. This approach helps to create positive impressions and fosters trust among its users (Bilgihan & Bujisic, 2005). Clear communication regarding the organization's vision, mission, core values, benefits, and development milestones enables users to build a favorable perception. The impressions formed through the website serve as signals that shape thoughts and emotions, ultimately playing a crucial role in public trust and the overall image of the organization (Braddy, 2008).

Furthermore, sponsorship programs and announcements featured on an organization's website hold considerable sway over public perception (Hankinson, 2000). These initiatives can enhance brand value, positively influence attitudes, and curate meaningful experiences for website visitors, contributing to the formation of favorable thoughts about the organization and its brand. Based on the insights drawn from the aforementioned studies, this research posits the following hypothesis regarding the relationship between website communication and brand trust:

H2: Website communication has a positive influence on brand image.

The Relationship Between Social Media and Brand Image

Santi Budiman (2021) proposed a model that explores the impact of social media communication on brand image. This model identifies three essential components: electronic word of mouth (E-WOM), online communi-

ties, and online advertising, all of which appear to have a beneficial effect on both brand image and brand loyalty.

Social media users actively contribute to brand development by fostering trust through the sharing of public information, the creation of engaging and relevant content, and user-generated contributions on platforms external to the enterprise.

Moreover, YouTube has emerged as a vital channel for enhancing universities' brand image. Research conducted by Mohamad Trio Febriyantino (2020) underscores the positive role of communication on YouTube in promoting brand awareness and enhancing corporate image. In light of these findings and the insights of industry experts, this study puts forth the following hypothesis:

H3: Social media has a positive influence on brand image

The Relationship Between Brand Image and Brand Trust

In the study by Mohammad Deheshti et al. (2016), an important connection between brand image and brand trust was identified. They suggested that "brand image is a suitable predictor of brand trust and can have a meaningful influence on it." By enhancing their brand image, companies can cultivate greater trust among their customers in the quality of their products. Strategies such as improving the shopping environment, diversifying product offerings, and ensuring product quality can effectively contribute to building customer trust. In light of this, we can posit the following hypothesis:

H4: Brand image positively affects brand trust

2.3 Research Model

From the theories applied, the study obtained positive results, and the proposed research framework is as follows:

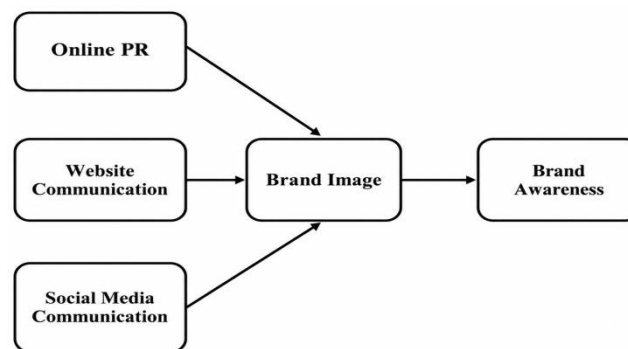


Figure 1. Research model

The proposed research model of factors influencing the effects of digital communication on brand image and brand trust in higher education is expressed through three independent factors, including online public relations (Online PR), website communication, and social media communication; one dependent variable, brand trust; and one mediating variable, brand image.

III. Methodology

After conducting an initial quantitative survey and statistical analysis, the authors advanced to the official survey phase in January 2026. This survey thoughtfully included first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students of both genders, with participants residing throughout Vietnam. To gather the data, the authors employed a convenience sampling method, ultimately collecting responses from 350 questionnaires, of which 330 were considered valid.

The questionnaire was designed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This scale has been recognized in previous studies for its high reliability, which is comparable to five- to seven-point scales in measuring attitudes and behaviors. Following data collection, the authors meticulously entered and processed the data in SPSS 23.0 to evaluate reliability and assess the proposed hypotheses.

IV.Results

4.1. Reliability Test Using Cronbach's Alpha

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Online PR	Website	Social Media	BI	BT
Cronbach's Alpha	.834	.878	.899	.879	.895

The scales are considered reliable provided that Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are greater than 0.6. Therefore, based on the testing results, the indicators of all variables satisfy this condition.

4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

According to the Rotated Component Matrix, all variables exhibit factor loadings greater than 0.5, indicating that no variables need to be eliminated. Consequently, the scale has been validated and meets the required parameters. This concludes the final results of the EFA analysis, which are now ready for use in further analyses.

Table 2. Factor Loading Analysis Results for Independent Variables

Rotated Component Matrix^a

Item	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3	Component 4
WEB5	.820			
WEB1	.812			
WEB2	.795			
WEB4	.662			
WEB3	.646			
EPR4		.805		
EPR3		.754		
EPR5		.714		
EPR6		.608		
SM4			.748	
SM3			.711	
SM2			.639	
SM1			.619	
SM5			.595	
BI2				.831
BI3				.765
BI1				.704
BI4				.689
BI5				.605

Table 3. Factor Loading Analysis Results for the Dependent Variable

Item	Component 1
BT3	.831
BT5	.765
BT4	.704
BT1	.689
BT2	.605

4.3. Hypothesis Testing

Through the analysis of the correlation relationship in the correlation matrix among the variables in the model, it can be seen that most independent variables in the research model have relatively strong correlations with the dependent variable, and the four independent variables have positive relationships with the dependent variable.

Table 4. Regression Results Using the Stepwise Method

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	.169	.201		.838	.403		
EPR	.089	.030	.098	2.953	.003	.903	1.108
WEB	.105	.035	.107	2.980	.003	.767	1.303
SM	.164	.033	.188	4.926	.000	.680	1.471

Brand image = 0.169 + 0.089*(ONLINE PR) + 0.105*(Website) + 0.164*(Social Media).

The regression results show that three factors of the model affect brand image: (1) Online PR, (2) website communication, and (3) social media communication. Among them, the "Social Media" component is the most important for brand image because it has the largest coefficient (0.164), followed respectively by "Website" and "ONLINE PR."

Table 5. Regression Results Using the Enter Method (BI and BT)

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	1.956	.468		4.177	.000
BI	.522	.126	.446	4.137	.000

Looking at Table 5, the Beta coefficient is 0.446. Thus, the regression equation of the model can be concluded as follows:

$$BT = 1.956 + 0.446*BI$$

$$\text{Brand trust} = 1.956 + 0.446*\text{Brand image}$$

Thus, the important components of Online PR, website communication, and social media communication are related to brand image and brand trust. The above results show that when lecturers perceive the university to have higher-quality digital communication activities, brand image value increases and broader trust is created among the public. The level of decision-making will be higher when receiving information from the university.

4.4. Testing of the Hypotheses of the Research Model

H1: There is a positive correlation between Online PR and brand image. This hypothesis has $t = 2.950$, $\text{sig.} = 0.000 < 0.05$, and a partial regression coefficient $= 0.089 > 0$, so this hypothesis is accepted.

H2: There is a positive correlation between website communication and brand image. This hypothesis has $t = 2.980$, $\text{sig.} = 0.000 < 0.05$, and a partial regression coefficient $= 0.105 > 0$, so this hypothesis is accepted.

H3: There is a positive correlation between social media communication and brand image. This hypothesis has $t = 4.926$, $\text{sig.} = 0.000 < 0.05$, and a partial regression coefficient $= 0.164 > 0$, so this hypothesis is accepted.

H4: There is a positive correlation between brand image and brand trust. This hypothesis has $t = 4.137$, $\text{sig.} = 0.020 < 0.05$, and a partial regression coefficient $= 0.446 > 0$, so this hypothesis is accepted.

V. Discussion

The findings highlight the growing strategic importance of digital communication in higher education branding. Social media emerged as the strongest predictor of brand image, reflecting the increasing reliance of students on interactive digital platforms. This result aligns with contemporary research emphasizing the role of user-generated content, engagement, and electronic word-of-mouth in shaping perceptions. Website communication also demonstrated a significant effect. University websites remain a primary source of official information and represent an important symbol of institutional professionalism and credibility. The positive relationship between brand image and brand trust confirms previous theoretical arguments that favorable perceptions enhance stakeholder confidence. Universities with strong digital communication capabilities are more likely to cultivate trust among students and other stakeholders.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it integrates multiple dimensions of digital communication within a single conceptual framework. Second, it extends branding theory to the higher education context. Third, it provides empirical evidence from Vietnam, thereby enriching the understanding of branding processes in emerging economies. The study also supports the argument that digital communication should be viewed as a strategic branding resource rather than merely a promotional activity.

University administrators should invest strategically in digital communication infrastructure and content management. Social media channels should be designed to encourage engagement, interaction, and authentic storytelling. Student achievements, academic activities, and institutional values should be communicated consistently across platforms. Website management should prioritize usability, accessibility, information quality, and mobile compatibility. Regular updates and transparent communication can strengthen institutional credibility. Online PR initiatives should focus on reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and community-building activities. Integrated communication strategies can help universities establish stronger emotional connections with stakeholders and enhance long-term brand equity.

The study is limited by its focus on a single institution and a specific stakeholder group. Future research should expand the sample to include multiple universities and additional stakeholders such as parents, alumni, and employers. Future studies may also employ Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine mediating and moderating effects. Additional variables such as institutional reputation, perceived quality, student satisfaction, and loyalty may further enrich the model.

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