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IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN BUILDING THE BRAND OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES (STUDY OF THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT)

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Impression Management in Building the Brand of Private Universities (Study of the Role of Public Relations in University Management)

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Abstract. This research aims to analyze the role of impression management implemented by Public Relations (PR) in building the brand of private universities in Indonesia. In the context of global higher education competition, private universities need to build a strong brand identity to attract prospective students and enhance institutional reputation. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method on several leading private universities in Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with PR practitioners, media content analysis, and observation. The research results show that the implementation of impression management through promise and verification strategies plays a significant role in building a positive perception of the university. The research findings indicate that the consistency between the promoted "brand promise" and the "real evidence" perceived by stakeholders is a determining factor in the success of the university brand. The theoretical and practical implications of this study contribute to the development of PR strategies in the context of higher education and enrich the literature on impression management from the perspective of organizational communication.

Keywords: Impression Management, University Brand, Public Relations.

1 Introduction

In the increasingly competitive climate of higher education, especially in Indonesia, private universities face significant challenges in attracting prospective students. With the increasing number of private universities, higher education institutions must be able to differentiate themselves from other competitors. One of the most effective ways is to build a strong university brand. This is where the role of Public Relations (PR) is crucial in creating, managing, and maintaining the university's image in the eyes of the public.

Impression management, is one of the strategies used by PR to manage public perception of the university. The goal is to create a consistent positive image, which in turn can attract more students and support the university's academic success.

The roots of the scientific study of impression management in the modern era are often associated with sociologist Erving Goffman, who framed impression management through the dramaturgical model of social interaction. Broadly speaking, Goffman views people as "actors" engaged in "performances" in various "settings" before an audience. The main task of the actors is to construct identities, where the impressions created become the main art of those identities.

According to Benson et al. [1], impression management actors play a role in displaying influence to impress the audience and explain how they set the stage to deliver a good presentation. This concept is also explained by DuBrin [2] by quoting Shakespeare's statement: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." The world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players who have their exits and their entrances.

As conveyed by Edmiston [3] the distinctive characteristics of a brand are highlighted to strengthen the impression or image of that brand. Characteristics can include values, culture, and beauty. In disseminating this uniqueness to the general public, it is important to ensure that the audience is appropriate. This is called "pitch adjustment." Impressions can be formed through visual or verbal displays or certain non-verbal gestures.

In building a positive image to shape impressions, an individual or an institution must act neutrally and not take sides with anyone. According to Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, McCann, and Van Bogart [3], credibility is built from public trust formed by skill, competence, experience, qualification, and reputation.

Edmiston's opinion, as quoted by Winnes and Bahri above, reinforces that brand and impression management have a strong connection, especially in terms of character. The brand of private universities shows how these campuses manage impression management to achieve the desired impression.

Private universities play a role as actors who want to make an impression on their audience through the brand they convey. The elements of identity conveyed in quantity contribute to strengthening the university's brand, as stated by Gardner and Martinko [4], namely physical structure, physical stimuli, and symbolic artifacts. Meanwhile, referring to Wexler, organizational culture provides strong signals for impression management. Organizational culture can be seen in the form of strategies, policies, symbols, myths, and organizational stories that function to teach, demonstrate, and support behaviors and attitudes deemed appropriate.

2 Research Methods

This article is based on research that uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to deeply explore the implementation of impression strategies of several leading private universities in Indonesia. Data were collected through method triangulation, including interviews and observations of the campus physical environment, student activities, and staff interactions with external stakeholders to evaluate the consistency between the promoted image and operational reality.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 *University Branding in a Competitive World*

Brands are artifacts that uniquely identify the organization; they are taken to convey the personality of the particular university. In the bewildering global economy, where products barrage consumers with calls for attention, branding is considered an imperative for marketing success. This logic penetrated the global field of universities: while universities have always proudly rallied behind their 1 seal and regarded them as symbols of the university's community, academic branding is linked with a marketing strategy aimed at differentiating the university from the (presumably) competing 14,000 universities in the world. [5]

Whisman mentioned,

as with many other business concepts considered for a university setting, branding began with favorable buzz but eventually encountered stiff resistance. The reasons for this resistance are complex and grow out of higher education's reluctance to acknowledge its concordant needs with corporate institutions. Like corporations, universities need to think about their long-term sustainability. Like corporations, they need to please a demanding public. And like corporations, they face stiff competition.[6]

He added approximately a decade since the adoption of branding practices in higher education, evidence suggests that many universities continue to face significant challenges in executing these strategies effectively. Budget constraints often hinder institutions from even planning, let alone implementing, comprehensive branding initiatives. Moreover, frequent changes in leadership disrupt continuity, as new administrations tend to abandon the branding efforts initiated by their predecessors. Nevertheless, the most fundamental issue appears to be the widespread neglect of internal strategic alignment in brand development. Rather than adopting a corporate brand strategy—which is more appropriate for the context of higher education—many institutions have mistakenly pursued a product brand strategy, leading to limited impact and coherence.

Tas & Ergin [7] observed that works on university branding are limited on international level as they are written in areas of perception, success of branding, brand harmonization, choice-model of college students, university brand components and the positioning of university brands in asian countries. Similarly, a number of universities can be said to have clear 'reputations' but not necessary 'brands'.

In an increasingly global and competitive higher education environment, branding has emerged as a critical strategy for universities to define and communicate their distinct identities. A university's brand serves not only as a visual or symbolic representation but also as a reflection of its unique character, values, and academic personality. In a world where consumers are constantly bombarded with choices, branding enables institutions to stand out and position themselves meaningfully among thousands of global counterparts.

However, the journey toward effective university branding has been met with various forms of resistance and practical challenges. Many within academia remain

hesitant to adopt branding strategies due to a perceived conflict with traditional educational values. This reluctance is often rooted in the discomfort of aligning university practices with those of corporate organizations, even though both sectors face similar pressures, such as maintaining financial sustainability, meeting the expectations of increasingly discerning stakeholders, and navigating a highly competitive landscape.

Despite the growing adoption of branding strategies, many universities struggle to implement them successfully. Financial constraints often prevent institutions from executing comprehensive branding plans, and leadership turnover frequently disrupts continuity, as new administrations tend to abandon previous initiatives. One of the most significant issues lies in the lack of internal alignment. Rather than embracing a holistic, institution-wide branding approach, many universities mistakenly apply narrow, product-based branding models, resulting in fragmented and ineffective messaging.

On a broader level, scholarly work on university branding remains limited, particularly in the international context. Most existing discussions focus on isolated topics such as student perception, brand success factors, brand consistency, and positioning strategies in specific regions. While many universities enjoy strong reputations, a clear distinction must be made between having a reputation and having a well-defined brand. Reputation is often built organically over time, whereas branding requires deliberate strategy, consistency, and alignment with institutional goals.

Altogether, these insights highlight the necessity for universities to move beyond superficial branding efforts and embrace a more integrated, strategic approach. By doing so, they can build stronger, more coherent identities that not only differentiate them in a crowded market but also resonate authentically with both internal and external audiences.

Delivered by Sevier [8] in general, students choose a university based on four reasons: (a) image or reputation, (b) location, (c) cost, and (d) availability of certain majors. When asked to choose between the four factors, students always choose image. Image according to Soemirat and Ardianto [9] is an impression, feeling, self-image of an object, person, or organization. The element of impression when seeing or feeling an object forms an image in a person.

The large number of private universities that have various characters and offers will certainly make it difficult for prospective students to choose. Kimberley et al [10] said "...looking to the brand simplifies the selection process for many. Thus, universities have increasingly recognized the importance of developing a brand identity for the university". Looking to the brand simplifies the selection process for many people. Hence, universities have increasingly recognized the importance of developing a brand identity.

3.2 The Role of Public Relations in Building a University Brand

Quoting the essence of Mikáčová and Gavlaková's statement [11] PR gives "legs" and life to a brand's attitude and promise through credible narratives and supports the truth of the brand that is portrayed through advertising. The article discusses the role of PR in an institution in managing the brand.

In the contemporary context, PR does not only play a role in distributing information or maintaining media relations, but also becomes a major actor in shaping the organization's strategic narrative. PR is now directly involved in the process of creating

brand identity and crafting key messages that reflect the values and positioning of the organization.

With the dynamics of communication becoming increasingly real-time, PR is required to play an active role in managing conversations around the brand on various digital platforms. This role includes functioning as a narrator who builds brand stories, as well as a facilitator who opens a space for dialogue between the organization and stakeholders.

Overall, public relations plays a dual role as a perception shaper and reputation guardian of the organization. This role is becoming increasingly important in the effort to build and maintain a strong, relevant and trusted brand by the public.

PR in private universities plays a role in building campus identity through media publications, social media management, websites, and other promotional activities. Chuck Brymer in *Brand and Branding* [12] explains that a brand is communicated and formed through two main elements: Promise and Verification.

1. Promise

A brand's promise is communicated through:

- Media: Using mass media to disseminate information about the university.
- Corporate Literature: Strengthening institutional identity through brochures, websites, and materials other promotions.
- Signage: Signboards and visual symbols that represent the university's identity.
- Advertising: Ads promising global standard education, international cooperation, and wide career opportunities for graduates.

2. Verification

The public will provide proof of the promises made through several aspects:

- Service: Standards of facilities, security, and ease of access for students.
- Product (Learning): Curriculum quality, teaching methods, and accreditation.
- Behavior: The use of English in learning and communication in campus as a reflection of campus identity.
- Environment: The campus atmosphere that reflects a global university.

The concepts of promise and verification are highly relevant to PR strategies in building a positive image for institutions. PR is responsible for conveying the institution's promises to the public through various media and ensuring that those promises are truly realized. By managing effective communication and building a strong reputation, PR helps the university gain trust from prospective students, parents, as well as the global academic and industrial world.

Impression management is an important aspect for a public relations professional. "Impression management is very suitable for enhancing the understanding of a public relations professional, because impression management and public relations involve strategic control for specific communication". Sallot stated, "The impression management perspective seems particularly well suited for enhancing understanding of public relations." [13] That impression management seems particularly well suited for enhancing understanding of public relations. According to Sallot, public relations can involve strategic control to communicate something desired to the public.

Edward Jones, [13], created five categories to explain organizational behavior in presenting itself to influence its public impression, namely:

1. **Integration Strategy (Pleasing Others):** Used by organizations that want to be perceived as pleasant or friendly. This strategy is realized by displaying positive emotions during interactions with the public.

2. **Self-promotion Strategy:** Used by organizations that want to be perceived as competent organizations. This strategy is applied by showcasing the achievements accomplished by the organization.

3. **Exemplification Strategy (For example):** Used by organizations that want to be perceived as exemplary or model organizations for others.

4. **Supplication Strategy (Self-Handicapping):** Used by organizations that want to be perceived as having limitations in helping the public.

5. **Intimidation Strategy:** Used by organizations that want to be perceived as strong and capable of controlling the situation.

3.3 Impression Management Strategies in University Branding

Impression management is a concept used to control how others perceive an organization. In the context of private universities, PR uses this strategy to promote an excellent campus image. One of the main elements of this strategy is the use of symbols that reinforce the university's identity as a leading educational institution.

The implementation of impression management can be seen in several private universities that utilize visual symbols such as logos, the use of English, and the presence of foreign students and lecturers on campus as part of their brand positioning. The presence of internationally standard facilities and bilingual instruction also plays an important role in supporting the university's image.

The communication carried out by PR in building the university brand is conducted through various channels, both mainstream media and social media. Media publications often include news about the university's achievements, international collaborations, as well as various academic and non-academic activities that support branding. Social media is also used to reach a wider audience, especially the younger generation who are the primary target.

4 Conclusion and Suggestion

In the increasingly competitive world of higher education, private universities in Indonesia need to build a strong brand to attract prospective students. Impression management has become an important strategy used by Public Relations (PR) to create a positive and consistent image in the eyes of the public. This concept refers to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, where the university acts as an "actor" setting the "stage" to create the best impression for the audience. PR plays a role in delivering promises through media, promotional materials, and advertisements, as well as ensuring verification through the quality of services, curriculum, behavior, and campus environment. With this approach, PR helps the university build trust and loyalty from prospective students and parents.

Impression management strategies also involve communication through mainstream media and social media to reach a wider audience. Success in building a brand does not only depend on the number of publications but also on the consistency of the mes-

sages conveyed. PR must ensure that every communication reflects the desired university identity, so the brand remains relevant and competitive in the global higher education market.

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