# Integrated Marketing Communication Practices as the Predictors on University Reputation of Malaysian Private Higher Education Institutions

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## Abstract

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) has piqued the fascination of both management and marketing specialists since its inception. Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate it in the context of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) as PHEIs operate like business entities and need students (customers) to support their survivability. The goal of this research is to examine the impact of IMC practices on the reputation of PHEIs. The research method used for this study is quantitative and guided by a stimulus-response (S-R) model. 331 valid data was collected and the findings revealed that word-of-mouth, online marketing, advertising, and public relations were the predictors of the university's reputation, however, the university website, university brand logo, sales promotion, and direct marketing were not the predictors. The study contributed to the management of PHEIs to structure and utilize their IMC strategies to disseminate persuasive messages to influence the customers (students) and gain a competitive advantage. The conclusion, implications, and future research avenues were also discussed.

**Keywords**: integrated marketing communication practices, university reputation, stimulus-response model, private higher education institutions, educational governance

## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by increased rivalry, shifting market landscapes, and shifting consumer demands, private higher education institutions (PHEIs) are being driven to implement marketing initiatives to improve their reputation (Chan et al., 2023b; Lee, 2021; Wan Abdullah et al., 2021). Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is one of the techniques that has arisen as a comprehensive method that integrates multiple avenues of communication to produce an amalgamated and enticing brand image and reputation. PHEIs' reputation is critical in keeping students, academicians, staff, and business partners (Cynthia & Chong, 2023; Raja, 2023) as an excellent reputation lends to an institution's long-term viability and survivability. In this setting, IMC appears as an intriguing accelerator for solidifying its reputation due to its capacity to synchronize varied communication strategies spanning numerous mediums (Rehman et al., 2022).

Lately, PHEIs have experienced a major fall in student enrolment in recent years, owing mostly to increased rivalry among universities and colleges (Symaco & Wan, 2017). This trend jeopardizes the institutions' long-term viability and expansion, as student enrolment is a vital aspect in ensuring financial stability, academic prominence, and institutional repute. The drop in enrolment has forced PHEIs to take proactive steps to attract and retain potential stakeholders such as students, faculty, funders, and industry partners. The strengthening of the institution's reputation is central to this strategy, as it has become a critical component in distinguishing itself in a stagnant and competitive market (Amado Mateus et al., 2024) and has led to greater employability (Nogales et al., 2020).

There has been recognition of practical problems of reputation in Malaysian universities. Firstly, there is a lack of numbers of students enrolled in a private university due to a shift in the market on product preferences (Nair et al., 2024). Consumers or students are more focused on university reputation and rankings that will feed their needs rather than their

wants (Chan et al., 2023b; Gadd, 2021). It is also found that it is hard to maintain a good relationship among the students due to a lack of interaction and communication engagement efforts (Crabtree, 2023). Therefore, affects the reputation of their institutions (Chan et al., 2023b; Amado Mateus et al., 2024).

Thus, IMC has arisen as a strategic framework for integrating numerous communication channels to offer coherent and cohesive brand messages. While IMC has been widely adopted in the corporate sector, insurance companies (Al-Azzam et al., 2024), the tourism industry (Qi et al., 2024), banking institutions (Quayson et al., 2024), and the study of reputation in the public university has also been discovered (Chan & Hasan, 2019). However, its implementation and success in the environment of PHEIs have received little attention (Hosain et al., 2021).

In addition, previous studies in higher education IMC activities have mostly focused on the traditional approaches of IMC such as public relations (Lee & Lee, 2015), advertising (Maring & Gmür, 2024), sales promotion (Kadir et al., 2020), and direct marketing with little emphasis paid to the contemporary approaches of IMC practices such as online/ digital marketing (Roy & Misra, 2024), the university website, visual identity (Melewar et al., 2017) which influence on university reputation (Butkouskaya et al., 2021). Thus, identifying how IMC activities contribute to creating perceptions is critical for strategic decision-making.

Thus, this study aims to test the relationship between contemporary IMC practices (university website, university brand logo, word-of-mouth, online marketing) and also the traditional IMC approaches (advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing) and university reputation. The study contributes to the corpus of marketing and strategic communication by combining the traditional and contemporary IMC practices in a single framework which is scarce to be investigated.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Underpinning

The stimulus-response (S-R) model (Kotler, 1997) of consumer behavior is effective for understanding specific customers' purchasing behavior. The concept states briefly that customers are subjected to communication triggers such as product, price, place, and promotion, as well as other stimuli in the context of marketing such as financial, technological, political, and social factors. The application of S-R model has been applied in various consumer behavior studies. For instance, Lu et al. (2018) examined the safety marketing S-R model on passenger behavior in the ferry industry. Besides, the study of Chan et al. (2024) also applied the S-R model in explaining the social media advertisement appeals and buying behavior of the fast-food industry. Thus, the IMC practices will act as the marketing stimuli whereas the buyer's mental processes will act as the student's perception which leads to the response which is the university's reputation (Holland, 2008).

### 2.2 Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Practices

IMC is a comprehensive approach for aligning and harmonizing a brand's messages throughout all marketing channels. It guarantees that the brand continuously promotes its main message, through advertising, social media, or direct marketing, thus developing its interaction with its target stakeholders and establishing a successful customer relationship (Maring & Gmür, 2024; Meha et al., 2022).

Universities that have effectively articulated their reputations are bound to draw the attention of many new applicants. University marketing communication, which involves the setup of billboards, banners, radio commercials, mass media, and television, is a method of informing, reminding, and influencing potential students either explicitly or implicitly about the services and programs they provide. The rapid advancement of technological advances enables colleges to become more widely recognized to the public via the Internet, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Marketing communication represents a brand's voice and is a tool for building conversation and connections with customers (Barcelos et al., 2018; Rehman et al., 2022). Marketing communication allows businesses to link their brands with others, locations, noteworthy occasions, and brand experiences, thus, adding to brand value by generating a favorable brand perception and establishing brand retention.

### 2.3 Hypothesis Development

The university website and the university's reputation are inextricably linked, as the website serves as the platform for shaping and expressing the institution's image and status (Solodovnikov et al., 2024). A well-designed, user-friendly website can provide a good first impression by demonstrating the institution's professionalism and information (Jongmans et al., 2022). Hence, clear, thorough, and easily accessible website information can help to build a university's online reputation (Faraoni et al., 2024). In addition, the study by Makuyana-Chowa et al. (2023) also found that website marketing can favorably lead to organizational reputation. Thus, it is postulated that:

**H1:** There is a positive relationship between the university website and the university's reputation.

The logo is a visual reflection of the university's identity and principles, and it influences how stakeholders view the institution (Dwitasari et al., 2024). A distinctive logo contributes to a strong visual identity, thus improving brand identification and recall, allowing consumers to remember and identify with the university (de Lencastre et al., 2023). A unique logo (identity) can help build a positive reputation (Chan et al., 2023b). Eventually, the logo of a reputable university inspires trust and confidence in stakeholders. A reputable logo helps attract top-tier students and faculty, as well as financing from sponsors and partners, by emphasizing the university's prestigious position (Xu et al., 2021). Therefore, this study hypothesized:

**H2:** There is a positive relationship between the university brand logo and the university's reputation.

Positive word-of-mouth and feedback from students can significantly improve the university's reputation (Amani, 2021; Christanto et al., 2024). Additionally, positive electronic word-of-mouth spreads swiftly through social networks, both online and offline can help build the image (Siddiqu et al., 2021) and brand awareness (Lim et al., 2024b), especially if powerful people or groups share their favorable experiences. Positive word-of-mouth can boost a university's brand and reputation, making it more appealing to potential students (Harahap et al., 2018; Yaping et al., 2023). Hence, it formulated that:

**H3:** There is a positive relationship between word-of-mouth and the university's reputation.

Effective digital/ online marketing methods can improve a university's reputation by improving visibility, engaging prospective students, and highlighting its strengths (Bungai et al., 2024). Optimizing the university's online marketing for search engines and creating high-quality content, (e.g., blog posts, videos, infographics) can help attract prospective students and stakeholders. Increased online presence via search engine optimization (SEO) can help the online brand positioning (Ahmad et al., 2024b). Sharing success stories, school events, and accomplishments on social media/ online can help the university's reputation by showcasing vitality and excellence (Maring & Gmür, 2024) and drive the students' choice of the university (Roy & Misra, 2024). Based on that, the study assumed that:

**H4:** Online/digital marketing will positively impact the university's reputation.

Effective advertising can help a university's reputation by raising awareness, attracting high-achieving students, and highlighting the institution's capabilities (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2022). Besides, advertising enables institutions to reach a varied and global audience, highlighting their programs and influencing the enrolment decision (Jambhulkar & Siddiqui, 2023). This enhanced reach has the potential to improve the university's international reputation. In insurance companies, Al-Azzam et al. (2023) found that advertising has a direct impact on the firm performance and study also affirmed that online advertising positively influences the purchase decisions (Lim et al., 2024a). Thus, the study postulated:

**H5:** There is a positive linkage between advertising and the university's reputation.

Public Relations (PR) techniques have a direct impact on how a university is seen by students (Funeka et al., 2022). Effective PR may improve and defend a university's reputation (Mustofa & Kurnia, 2021). This has also aligned with the study of Khanfar et al. (2024), where they found that e-PR positively impacts the purchasing behavior of telco products. PR staff regularly send out news releases and collaborate with journalists to secure media coverage of university events, research breakthroughs, faculty accomplishments, and student successes which will impact student recruitment (Oanh et al., 2023). Effective PR techniques improve a university's reputation by gaining positive media coverage, engaging stakeholders, handling crises, and delivering consistent messaging (Anggarina et al., 2024; Calilao et al., 2024). Therefore, the study formulated that:

**H6:** Public relations are positively impacting the university's reputation.

Sales promotions are more often associated with businesses, universities employ a variety of promotional strategies to achieve their marketing objectives (Kumari, 2020). For example, Kadir et al. (2023) found that sales promotion has a positive and significant impact on reputation and Kango et al. (2021) also found that sales promotion has a significant impact on choosing the college and brand image of the institution. Thus, waiving application costs or providing early bird discounts might boost the number of student applications. Hence, these promotions can help the university's reputation as they perceive the university as a student-friendly and financially responsible institution. Based on the notion, it proposed that:

**H7:** Sales promotion has a positive impact on the university's reputation.

Direct marketing is the process of communicating with specific individuals or groups, often through personalized messages, emails, mailers, phone calls, and other direct contact methods (Chanpreet, 2023). Personalized communication from direct marketing can make receivers feel cherished and understood, thereby improving the university's reputation. This direct marketing personalized strategy can help the university's reputation by exhibiting

concern for individual requirements and preferences (Chandra et al., 2022), and this is also congruent with the result of Al-Azzam et al. (2023) that direct marketing positively impacts the insurance firm performance, and lead to the below hypothesis:

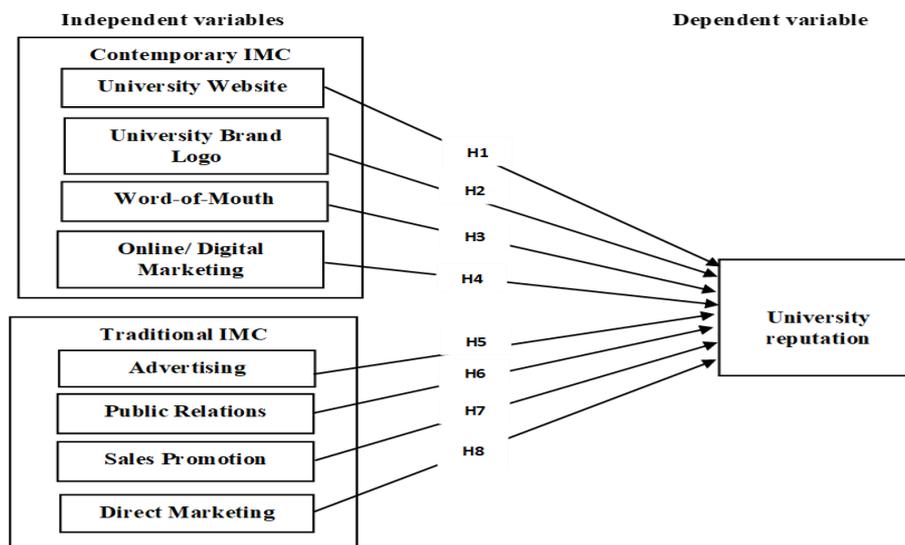**H8:** There is a positive connection between direct marketing and the university's reputation.



Figure 1. Conceptual framework

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study used a quantitative method by using the survey design. Quantitative research is useful for investigating the relationship between the variables, making predictions, and generalizing results to larger populations (Ghanad, 2023). Surveys are commonly used to characterize and explore human behavior. Hence, they are frequently employed in social sciences research (Ponto, 2015).

### 3.2 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling is a non-probability way of collecting a sample in which researchers utilize their expertise to select certain individuals who will assist the study achieve its objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). This strategy is also known as subjective sampling by statistical experts since it requires the application of judgment to choose which respondents can most effectively assist the study address its research objective. Thus, for this study, the current students (customers) of the private universities were selected, as they are already with the institutions and able to perceive the IMC activities and reputation. Besides, researchers used the G-power analysis to calculate the sample size. Thus, the minimum sample size required for this study is 160 (Predictors: 8; effect size: 0.15; Power: 0.95), and the current study has 331 valid samples, which is sufficient for data analysis.

### 3.3 Measurement

The research instrument was structured into three (3) sections. Section A comprised demographic inquiries regarding the respondents, including gender, nationality, race, age, education level, university, and current year of study. Close-ended questions were utilized in this section to ensure respondents' validity and ability to meet the criteria required for participation. Section B focused on the independent variables, namely the IMC practices, where the items for the university website, university brand logo, and word-of-mouth were adapted and modified from Melewar et al. (2017). In addition, the measurement items for advertising and sales promotion are adapted and modified from Buil et al. (2010). The items for public relations are adapted from (Hsieh & Li, 2008) and direct marketing adapted from (Zephaniah et al., 2020). Finally, Section C asked the respondents' thoughts on the university's reputation, where the items are adapted from Ponzi et al. (2011). All the items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The online survey was disseminated using Google Forms. The survey was shared with targeted respondents through multiple communication channels, including email, social media platforms, and messaging apps to reach the intended respondents. The data was collected from 1st April 2024 until 1st June 2024, and 331 valid data were gathered.

*3.5 Reliability Analysis*

Reliability is critical for producing consistent and reliable results in research (Ahmad et al., 2024a). Cronbach's alpha values are used in the study to analyze the internal consistency of the variables, which indicates how accurately the items measure each construct. According to Taber (2018), the alpha values of 0.70 and higher show an acceptable internal consistency. From Table 1, the results show that all the variables are reliable for this study.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha value of the variables

| Variable(s) | Cronbach's Alpha Value (pre-test n=30) | Cronbach's Alpha Value (post-test n=331) | No. of items |
|---|---|---|---|
| University Website | 0.775 | 0.793 | 5 |
| University Brand Logo | 0.878 | 0.725 | 4 |
| Word-of-mouth | 0.908 | 0.786 | 3 |
| Online/Digital Marketing | 0.773 | 0.763 | 3 |
| Advertising | 0.892 | 0.853 | 4 |
| Public Relations | 0.799 | 0.757 | 3 |
| Sales Promotion | 0.860 | 0.703 | 3 |
| Direct Marketing | 0.887 | 0.754 | 4 |
| University Reputation | 0.869 | 0.807 | 4 |

*3.6 Validity analysis*

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) is used to test the validity. A KMO value of more than 0.6 is deemed acceptable, and values nearer 1.0 suggest greater suitability (Kaiser, 1974). Thus, the KMO value for this study is 0.783 (Table 2), demonstrating that the data is appropriate for factor analysis, as it resides within the acceptable limits and the validity was granted.

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test for Validity

| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy | | 0.783 |
|---|---|---|
| **Bartlett's Test of Sphericity** | Approx. Chi-Square | 14004.65 |
| | df | 528 |
| | Sig. | 0.000 |

*3.7 Normality Analysis*

Skewness and kurtosis are statistical measurements that define the form and spread of data distributions (Kim, 2013). Table 3 shows these values for the variables, which provide insight into the data's normalcy. To test the normality, the Kurtosis and Skewness values must be within the range of –2 until +2 (Orcan, 2020). Thus, the data of this study is still normally distributed and inferential statistics can further be performed.

Table 3. Skewness and kurtosis of the variables

| Variables | Kurtosis | Skewness |
|---|---|---|
| University Website | 0.288 | -0.201 |
| University Brand Logo | 1.410 | -1.065 |
| Word-of-mouth | 1.375 | -0.122 |
| Online/Digital Marketing | 0.184 | -0.595 |
| Advertising | -0.590 | -0.489 |
| Public Relations | -0.179 | -0.282 |
| Sales Promotion | 1.024 | -0.770 |
| Direct Marketing | 0.382 | -0.855 |
| University Reputation | -0.749 | -0.424 |

# 4. Results

*4.1 Demographics Data of the Respondents*

Table 4 shows the demographic characteristics of the 331 respondents. The percentages of gender show that male and female respondents have relatively equal samples. For the nationality, the majority of the respondents were Malaysian (93.7%). Next, for the race category, more than half (51.1%) of the respondents are Malay. Besides, more than half of the

respondents are between the age of 20-24 years old (53.8%), which represents young adults, and hold Bachelor's degree (40.2%). Lastly, for the current year of study, nearly half (44.8%) of the respondents are from year 3 of their study, which indicated that they have been in the universities for some time and can perceive the marketing initiatives and the reputation of the universities much better.

Table 4. Demographics of Respondents (N=331)

| Variables | Category | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 162 | 48.9 |
| | Female | 169 | 51.1 |
| **Nationality** | Malaysian | 310 | 93.7 |
| | International | 21 | 6.3 |
| **Race** | Malay | 169 | 51.1 |
| | Chinese | 73 | 22.1 |
| | Indian | 68 | 20.5 |
| | Others | 21 | 6.3 |
| **Age** | <20 | 15 | 4.5 |
| | 20-24 | 178 | 53.8 |
| | 25-29 | 127 | 38.4 |
| | 30-34 | 6 | 1.8 |
| | 35-39 | 2 | 0.6 |
| | 40-44 | 1 | 0.3 |
| | >44 | 1 | 0.3 |
| **Education** | Foundation/ Diploma | 77 | 23.3 |
| | Bachelor's Degree | 133 | 40.2 |
| | Master's Degree | 65 | 19.6 |
| | Ph.D | 55 | 16.6 |
| | Professional Certificate | 1 | 0.3 |
| **University** | A | 174 | 52.6 |
| | B | 157 | 47.4 |
| **Current year of study** | Year 1 | 26 | 7.6 |
| | Year 2 | 103 | 29.9 |
| | Year 3 | 154 | 44.8 |
| | Year 4 | 56 | 16.3 |
| | Year 5 | 5 | 1.5 |

Table 5 illustrates Pearson's correlations among the variables and indicates a series of positive but weak relationships between the university website ($r = 0.232$, $p = 0.000$), university brand logo ($r = 0.354$, $p = 0.000$), direct marketing ($r = 0.110$, $p = 0.000$) and university reputation. In addition, advertising ($r = 0.478$, $p = 0.000$), sales promotion ($r = 0.432$, $p = 0.000$), public relations ($r = 0.558$, $p = 0.000$), word-of-mouth ($r = 0.617$, $p = 0.000$), online marketing ($r = 0.659$, $p = 0.000$) and university reputation have a positive and moderate correlation (Akoglu, 2018). With p values less than 0.05, the correlations of all the variables are statistically significant. This means that when students perceive the determinants of the university's IMC practices, it will form a favorable reputation in the students' minds.

Table 5. Correlation between the IMC activities and university reputation (n = 331)

| | University Reputation | |
|---|---|---|
| **Variables** | **Pearson's Correlation ($r$)** | **$p$ (1-tailed)** |
| University Website | 0.232** | 0.000 |
| University Brand Logo | 0.354** | 0.000 |
| Word-of-mouth | 0.617** | 0.000 |
| Online/Digital Marketing | 0.659** | 0.000 |
| Advertising | 0.478** | 0.000 |
| Public Relations | 0.558** | 0.000 |
| Sales Promotion | 0.432** | 0.000 |
| Direct Marketing | 0.110* | 0.023 |

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (1-tailed)

The value of R is .807 indicating that there are high correlations between the variables. The value of $R^2$ is .651 which indicates that the IMC practices are impacting the university's reputation by 65.1%. Whereas the remaining 34.9% of other variables are currently not being investigated.

According to Table 6, H3 to H6 were supported, while H1, H2, H7 and H8 were rejected. The word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.604$, p = 0.000), online marketing ($\beta = 0.535$, p = 0.000), advertising ($\beta = 0.300$, p = 0.000), and public relations ($\beta =$

0.245, p = 0.000) were found to have a positive and significant impact with the university reputation. However, the university website, university brand logo, sales promotion, and direct marketing were not supported. Furthermore, word-of-mouth has the greatest standardized beta at 0.604, indicating that word-of-mouth is the strongest predictor of university reputation.

Table 6. Multiple regression analysis of university reputation with IMC practices

| Predictor Variables | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients Beta | $p$ | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | | | |
| (Constant) | 3.585 | 0.929 | | 0.000 | |
| H1: University Website | -0.161 | 0.055 | -0.167 | 0.004 | NS (-ve) |
| H2: University Brand Logo | -0.106 | 0.074 | -0.073 | 0.151 | NS |
| H3: Word-of-mouth | 0.604 | 0.067 | 0.430 | 0.000 | S |
| H4: Online/Digital Marketing | 0.535 | 0.088 | 0.360 | 0.000 | S |
| H5: Advertising | 0.300 | 0.060 | 0.306 | 0.000 | S |
| H6: Public Relations | 0.245 | 0.062 | 0.180 | 0.000 | S |
| H7: Sales Promotion | -0.091 | 0.077 | -0.067 | 0.239 | NS |
| H8: Direct Marketing | -0.143 | 0.052 | -0.151 | 0.007 | NS (-ve) |

F = 75.193      df1 = 8, df2=322     *p = 0.000*

R = 0.807 R2 = 0.651      Adjusted R2 = 0.643

*Note: NS = Not supported, S = Supported*

## 5. Discussion

The current findings showed that word-of-mouth is the predictor of university reputation which aligned with the outcomes of (Amani, 2021; Christanto et al., 2024), where the students perceived that the PHEIs understudied are still performing and have good reviews. Thus, when the current students (customers) of the universities are happy with the institutions, they will spread the good words of the institutions to their peers, families, and the public, and this will form a good perception in the mind of the stakeholders and lead to forming a solid reputation.

Besides, the current findings also supported the findings of (Bungai et al., 2024; Maring & Gmür, 2024), in which online/ digital marketing can help to enhance the university's reputation. Universities in the contemporary era have tried to leverage digital elements in their marketing efforts. For instance, the help of digital marketing elements such as SEO will make browsing the university's information easy and convenient, which in turn develops good feelings and leads to a reputation in the long run.

In addition, other research has also confirmed the significant and positive influence between advertising and university reputation, which is congruent with past studies (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2022; Jambhulkar & Siddiqui, 2023). University advertisements can project a consistent message to the current and potential customers and persuade them of the strengths and identity of the university which further leads to formulating a favorable reputation.

Moreover, previous researchers also presented findings on the significant and positive impact between public relations (PR) and university reputation, by elaborating that desirable reputation correlates with outstanding performance (Anggarina et al., 2024; Mustofa & Kurnia, 2021). This is because the PR acts as a bridge between the universities and their stakeholders by communicating consistent responsible and ethical messages (e.g. university identity, social responsibility, accreditation of the programs by the government authorities, etc). This will surely gauge the customer's perceptions where the customers will think of the universities as responsible institutions and this will help to establish a fruitful reputation.

However, the university brand logo, university website, sales promotion, and direct marketing did not significantly impact the university's reputation due to some of the relationships were negative. For instance, the relationship between the university website and direct marketing has a negative relationship with the university's reputation, while the university brand logo and sales promotion exhibited a non-significant impact.

A possible explanation could be many PHEIs are mushrooming causing clutter of messages among the university's websites and thus creating the "noises" as there are many other more interesting contents also appearing on the virtual platform which caused the students (customers) lack aware of the university website, unless they intentionally search for it. As a consequence, it caused the students not able to recognize well the university logo (identity), which explained the insignificant results. Besides, the sales promotion showed a not significant result, and it could be understood that the study focused on PHEIs, where students' fees are the income for the universities. Thus, a sales promotion strategy of giving discounts or partially waiving the tuition fees might be hard for the university's operation to sustain and implement.

In a nutshell, the findings imply that institutions that want to improve their reputation should prioritize word-of-mouth,

online marketing, advertising, and public relations initiatives. These activities have been found to have the greatest positive impact on how the university is perceived. On the other hand, sales promotion and direct marketing must be further strengthened so that it will lead to a solid university's reputation.

## 6. Conclusions

This study examined the students' (customers') perspectives on the contemporary and traditional approaches of IMC practices (university website, university brand logo, word-of-mouth, online/digital marketing, advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and direct marketing) with university reputation. The hypothesis testing confirmed that IMC activities such as word-of-mouth, online/ digital marketing, advertising, and public relations are the predictors of university reputation.

### 6.1 Implications of the Study

This study looked at the impact of IMC on university reputation in PHEIs and shed light on how various promotional marketing activities influence perception and reputation. Understanding these ramifications can help drive strategic decisions, improve marketing efforts, and boost the overall reputation of PHEIs.

This study contributes to the corpus of knowledge in marketing communication literature by giving empirical evidence on the impact of IMC (traditional and contemporary) practices on a university's reputation. The study investigates how different IMC activities which act as the stimuli, can affect the perception and reputation (responses) of private universities. Using the S-R model, it is proven that IMC activities act as stimuli, eliciting certain responses from the target audience (Holland, 2008). Furthermore, the use of the S-R model in this research study allows for a more structured understanding of how IMC initiatives might act as stimuli to elicit good perceptions and build a solid university reputation.

Next, the study's main findings can help PHEIs to develop marketing and communication policies. Policies emphasizing the importance of maintaining high standards for brand identification, website quality, and public relations can help institutionalize best practices and ensure long-term success in these areas. Other than that, this study proves that establishing the conceptual framework for the implementation of IMC strategies helps promote accountability and continual development of private universities. Regular assessments and audits of marketing operations should be carried out frequently to assess their influence on reputation to create a competitive advantage.

### 6.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study

While the study on the impact of IMC practices on university reputation in PHEIs provides useful insights, it is critical to recognize certain limits and provide areas for future research. Firstly, the study used a cross-sectional design, with data collected at a single point in time. This approach limits the ability to examine changes in university reputation over time, as well as the long-term effects of IMC efforts. Hence, it does not establish causal linkages. To improve the situation in the future, future researchers may consider using longitudinal studies or mixed-method approaches.

Besides, this study only focused on PHEis in a single geographical region or country, restricting the findings' applicability to other locations or global contexts. Therefore, the findings may not apply to institutions in other cultural, economic, and educational contexts. Future researchers should undertake comparable studies in different countries and regions to examine the impact of IMC practices on university reputation in different cultural and educational settings. In addition, testing the consequences of IMC and reputation to the other industries and public-listed (Chan et al., 2016) and multinational corporations will also be interesting to examine in the future.

Lastly, the current study only tests the direct effects, future studies can incorporate more relevant variables such as willingness to pay (Özhan et al., 2022), student identification, and sustainability reporting/ communication (Chan et al., 2023a) and test the word-of-mouth as a multidimensional construct to expand the current framework by testing the mediators/ moderators and perform multigroup analysis on the demographic variables to further contribute to the corpus of marketing communication strategies.

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### Authors contributions

TJC, NAM, and AAA were responsible for study design and revising. NAM was responsible for data collection. TJC NAM and AAA drafted the manuscript. MLN and AHHF revised the manuscript and TJC, AAA, MLN, and AHHF proofread it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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