

# Factors Influencing Reputation of a Malaysian Private University from a Strategic Communication Management Perspective

Tak Jie Chan<sup>1</sup>, Jingjing Lee<sup>2</sup>, Miew Luan Ng<sup>3</sup>, Hon Tat Huam<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Applied Communication, Multimedia University, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>School of Communication & Creative Design, SEGi University, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts, INTI International University, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup>Putra Business School, Malaysia

Correspondence: Tak Jie Chan, Faculty of Applied Communication, Multimedia University, Malaysia.

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## Abstract

Reputation studies have gained attention tremendously as a significant area of research in corporate communication and business-related studies. Universities today have realized the importance of having a solid reputation to attract their stakeholders, mainly the students (customers) as they are the largest stakeholder for the survival of the university. This study aims to investigate the predicting factors of tangible and intangible resources and their impacts on the university reputation of a private university in Klang Valley from the student's perspective. The study applied Resource-Based View Theory as an underpinning theory to explain these relationships. The study applied a quantitative survey design and generated 400 valid responses. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. The findings revealed that tangible resources (university logo, university facilities) and intangible resources (university heritage, university image) are the predictors of the university's reputation, where university heritage appears to be a prominent predictor among the other determinants. The current study contributed to the corporate communication and marketing scholarship by clarifying the gaps between image and reputation as two different constructs. This has called upon the management and marketing department of the private university to pay attention to the determinants highlighted, especially the heritage of the university as it is a unique selling point for the institution to differentiate from its rivals. Conclusion, implications, and suggestions for future study were also discussed.

**Keywords:** university logo, university facilities, university heritage, university image & reputation, resource-based view theory, strategic communication management

## 1. Introduction

Reputation management has gained attention from corporate communication and marketing scholars (Brønn & Buhmann, 2018; Frandsen et al., 2017; Veh et al., 2019) as it ensures the survival of the firms and makes the institutions remain favorable in the eyes of the stakeholders (Azham & Tg. Ahmad, 2020). Since entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities all over the world are facing challenges, and the competition for higher education is becoming increasingly fierce (Ghasemy et al., 2018). The educational sector of the country such as universities and colleges has started to operate like a business treating their students as customers (Chen & Esangbedo, 2018) to build a favorable reputation. As opined by Augusto and Torres (2018), reputation has become one of the most prominent tools to promote products or services to the target customers.

Rajeendram (2020) highlighted that in Malaysia setting private higher education institutions (HEIs) is a growing industry which indicated RM31.5 billion to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), and it is expected to contribute RM65 billion to GDP in the year 2025 for the private education industry, and expected to achieve RM 84 billion to GDP at the year of 2030 for the long terms goal, where Malaysia as a preferred international education hub. As proposed by Quraeshi and Luqmani (2009), education in Malaysia is becoming more commercialized, which is also a development trend in the global education system. Therefore, the university can be seen as a business and needs to develop its reputation for competitive advantage (Jones et al., 2021; Ramos-Monge et al., 2017).

However, recent news highlighted that 72% of high school leavers will not intend to continue their studies at the higher

education level due to the unstable economy, which has placed the future of private colleges and universities in the dark (Zulaikha, 2022). The universities in Malaysia, especially the private HEIs faced several challenges, which these challenges would exert an impact on the investment, operation, and functions of the universities (Ghasemy et al., 2018). The current study highlights the challenges, where Malaysian educational institutions fail to recruit students as their plans as private HEIs are depending on the student to survive (Sharma, 2020), other challenges such as standardization issues, retention of staff, and competitiveness within other institutions (Panda et al., 2019). The high degree of competition in the market had an adverse effect on students' thinking and decision-making. The students do not know whether they should sign up for higher education courses in Malaysia or choose some other famous colleges and universities in developed countries (Foroudi, Dinnie, et al., 2017), where all these required the universities to have a solid reputation to differentiate themselves from their rivals (Plungpongpan et al., 2016; Ramdan et al., 2021).

Previous studies on reputation studies have been investigated focusing on various industries such as the alcohol industry (Chan et al., 2018; Mohd Hasan et al., 2022), the aviation industry (Tay et al., 2020), the banking industry (Kanto et al., 2016). Although studies that focused on the university setting have also been found, for instance, public university (Chan & Mohd Hasan, 2019), however, there is a dearth of studies to examine the reputation of the private HEIs as it is timely (Martín-Miguel, 2020; Mateus & Acosta, 2022).

In addition, the corporate logo has received less attention in marketing literature and is rarely researched in the context of the emerging economy (Foroudi, Hafeez, & Foroudi, 2017), which same goes for reputation studies (Ma, 2022). Most importantly, there is confusion in the previous literature in terms of the image and reputation, as some scholars mentioned that these two constructs are the same and there are difficulties in establishing the two differences (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019; Irfan et al., 2020; Jang et al., 2019), where there are also arguments that these two constructs are different and need to access separately (Szwajca, 2018), as the image is the mental picture or perception, but reputation as somehow more stable based on the accumulation of the images of the stakeholders based on the corporations' past activities and behaviors for some time (Fombrun et al., 2008). Thus, authors test these variables differently, as urged by numerous past studies that the image and reputation are different (Igenhoff & Fuhrer, 2010; Podnar & Golob, 2017), and additional research on this are needed.

Besides, previous reputation studies mostly applied the Reputation Quotient (Chan & Mohd Hasan, 2019; Dayanç Kiyat, 2017; Kanto et al., 2016) and RepTrak (Bratus & Sydorov, 2021; Chan et al., 2018; Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2019; Wilson, 2022), but studies which look from different viewpoints of Resource-based View theory, which from the lens of firm strategy (Boyd et al., 2010; Furr & Eisenhardt, 2021), particularly in the digital age (Menz et al., 2021) are timely as private universities are now operated like business firms, which urged the researchers to relook into it.

Based on the deficiency of the previous studies, this study aims to examine the students' perspectives on the tangible resources (university logo, university facilities) and intangible resources (university heritage, university image) and their impact on the university reputation of a private HEI.

## 2. Literature Review

### Resource-based View (RBV) Theory

The underpinning theory used to guide the study is the Resource-based View Theory (RBV) (Barney, 1991; Barney et al., 2011). According to Barney (1991, p.101), the RBV focuses on the tangible and intangible resources that firms require to perform specific actions and achieve sustained competitive advantages. Thus, tangible and intangible resources are crucial for a firm's profitability and market performance (Kamasak, 2017). To apply the RBV in the context of this research, the research posits that the university brand logo (Park et al., 2013) and university facilities (Adero, 2012) as tangible resources, while university heritage (Wu, 2022) and university image (Kong & Farell, 2010; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019; Jeet & Aspal, 2021) as intangible resources to enhance its reputation and competitive advantage which can boost the marketing capability.

### Relationship between university logo and university reputation

Logos are the most important communication tool, and companies often use their logos to manage their image through the company's brand elements (Foroudi, Melewar & Gupta, 2017). The logo is an important facet of business that aims to tell the people the firm's or institution's name and at the same time, create a visually appealing signal to identify the firm. As stated by Seo et al. (2015), it is necessary to attract and create a lasting impression in the mind of the target audience. Due to visual literacy, the ability to understand and create visual information, a school's logo can provide knowledge about the identity of the school it represents (Hattwig et al., 2013). The logo is important for universities because they can immediately promote the identity to university members and stakeholders. The logo of a university is its totem, which transforms the abstract language of school philosophy, cultural characteristics, professional characteristics, and behavior patterns into an organized, systematic, and standardized visual scheme (Iftach & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019).

For instance, Foroudi et al., (2020a), examine the internal stakeholder (employees and students) of the U.K. universities, where they found that the relationship between logo and co-creation behavior of reputation is significant for students, however, it was not significant from the perspective of employees. This has also aligned with the study of Alessandri et al., (2006), where they found university visual identity and reputation are positively related in a private university in the United States. Based on the above discussion, this study hypothesized that:

*H1: University's logo positively influences the university's reputation.*

### **Relationship between university facilities and university reputation**

Students desire a good learning environment, which reflects the importance of university facilities, which are essential to attract new students and retain the current ones. From the point of view of a university, facilities can be access to libraries, a foreign excursion as well as access to privileged varsity clubs (Shabbir et al., 2017). High-quality and high-standard facilities are considered to have a great impact on student's choice of academic institutions, which will affect their overall view of the university (Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2018).

Kärnä and Julin (2015) found that compared with supporting factors such as accessibility, bus stops, bike lanes, and sidewalks, teaching, and research-related facilities have a greater impact on students' satisfaction, performance, and overall acceptance of the university. Bakrie's et al., (2019) study also found that service quality which included facilities of the university learning environment positively impacts the institutional reputation. In addition, Ngan and Khoi (2020) examined the relationship between university reputation, service quality, and learners' behavioral intention in Vietnam. The results found that facilities confirmed as a construct under service quality and the service quality positively influence the institutional reputation which supported the study of Virappan and Chan (2020), where service quality positively impacts the reputation of the airline company. This has also congruent with the results of Agrey and Lampadan (2014), as they found that learning environment (e. g. modern learning environment and facilities, infrastructure, library, computer lab) as well as having good sporting facilities as factors that contribute to the student in choosing a university.

Besides, the study also found that various services including the facilities services impact the image and reputation of the university in Qatar (Alhaza et al., 2021), which aligned with the study of Hasan and Hosen (2022), where the study found that university service quality dimension (hostel facilities, library, and lab facilities) positively impact the student satisfaction and loyalty, while university reputation and external image have partial mediating effects on these relationships. Based on the discussion, the current study postulated that:

*H2: University facilities positively impact the university's reputation.*

### **Relationship between university heritage and university reputation**

Heritage generally provides data related to the history of the university and the achievements it has made to date (Foroudi, Dinnie, et al., 2017). As opined by Balmer (2013), it contains milestones achieved by the institution and is informed to the target market to make the stakeholders feel a sense of belonging to be part of the culture and heritage.

Merchant et al., (2015) aim to investigate the effects of university heritage and reputation on the attitude of prospective students in the USA. The results revealed that university heritage positively impacts a university's reputation, and students from Asian countries showed a long-term stronger relationship between these variables. Furthermore, Raharjo (2020) intended to investigate brand heritage, corporate reputation, and brand image on buying intention of automotive products, and they found that brand heritage and reputation positively influence the buying intention, which is also congruent with the study of Zeren and Kara (2021), that brand heritage has a positive significant impact on the purchase intentions of Turkish airlines. In addition, Balmer and Chen (2017) also found that reputation and corporate heritage brands are significantly related. The past related study revealed that place heritage positively impacts place image which leads to reputation and brand competitiveness in retail stores in London (Foroudi et al., 2020b), which supported the notion that the effects of brand heritage on corporate reputation and various stakeholder outcomes studies are needed (Wiedmann et al., 2013). Based on the discussion, this study hypothesized that:

*H3: University brand heritage positively influences the university's reputation.*

### **Relationship between university image and university reputation**

University image is all about the point of view of students about the university (Chao et al., 2015). Cretu and Brodie (2007) aim to examine the impact of brand image and company reputation by focusing on small firms from the customer-value perspective. The results showed that brand image influences product and service quality while the company's reputation has a stronger influence on customer value and customer loyalty. In addition, the corporate image of a university strongly affects its reputation, which will be reflected in the satisfaction and loyalty of students (Alves & Raposo, 2010), which is also congruent with the studies of (Foroudi et al., 2019; Foroudi et al., 2020b), where university image and university reputation are positively related.

Besides, de Leaniz and del Bosque Rodríguez (2016) found that functional and emotional images have a positive impact on the corporate reputation of service companies in Spanish. Irfan et al., (2020) intend to investigate how university student perceived the university image and its reputation in five public universities in Malaysia, where the results revealed that university image influence university reputation positively through the mediating role of student satisfaction. This is because a well-strategies corporate image process of an institution will help to make it high visibility, and recognizability and lead to a positive reputation (Karabetyan, 2020). Based on past studies, the study hypothesized that:

*H4*: university image has a positive relationship with university reputation.

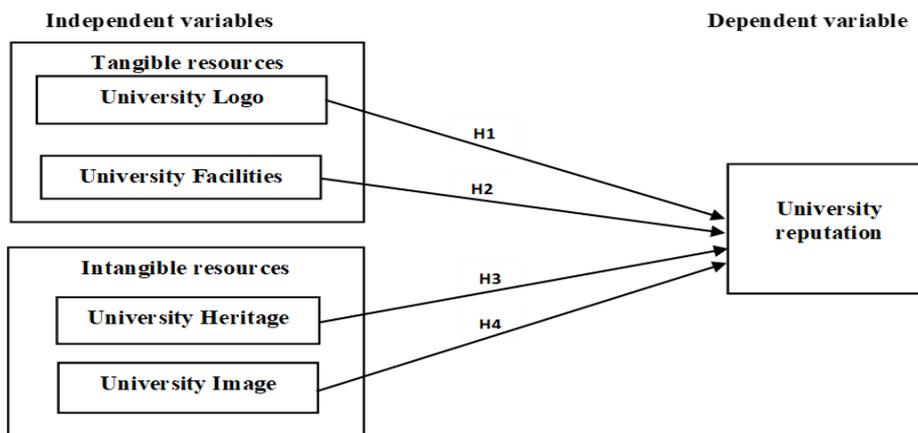


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

### 3. Methodology

#### Research Design

This study applied a quantitative research design. This design consists of making hypotheses based on theoretical models and making specific measurements of variables, analyzing data, and verifying the hypotheses (Schadewitz & Jachna, 2007). Besides, the quantitative design required primary data, so the researchers collect the data to make the research more primitive. Thus, a questionnaire/survey was utilized in this study.

#### Sampling procedure

This study was carried out at a private university in Klang Valley, Malaysia. However, researchers are not able to get the sampling frame of the entire population of university students. Thus, researchers used G-power analysis to determine the sample size of the study, with (Predictors: 4; effect size: 0.15, Power: 0.95), the minimum sample size needed for this study is 129, but the current study has 400 valid responses, hence, it was deemed fit for statistical analysis. This has accordance with the notion of Sekaran and Bougie (2016), where a sample size ranging from 30 and 500 would be sufficient and acceptable for social science studies. This study applied purposive sampling, where the survey was only answered by the students of a particular private university.

#### Measurement

The instrument was divided into three parts. Section A indicated the demographic items. For section B, items about the independent variables which comprised of (logo, facilities, heritage, and image) were asked, where items for the university logo were adapted from (Foroudi et al., 2019), items for university facilities were adapted from (Weerasinghe et al., 2018; García García, et al., 2017). Items for university heritage were adapted from (Panda et al., 2019) and statements for university image were modified from (Alwi et al., 2019). Section C focused on the items of university reputation modified from Heffernan et al., (2018). The Likert scale's anchor (1 - Strongly Disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 - Somewhat Agree, 4 - Agree, 5 - Strongly Agree) was applied for Sections B and C.

#### Reliability analysis

Cronbach's Alpha analysis is one of the widely used reliability methods in social sciences (Bonett & Wright, 2014). This method is used to measure the reliability of the data before real data collection. Cronbach's alpha is a proportion of the internal consistency of the items in measuring a construct/variable. Table 1 showed that Cronbach's alpha value of the pre-test ranged from 0.728 to 0.860, hence showing that the questionnaire is reliable, since, the value is higher than the required Cronbach alpha value of 0.7. However, for university heritage, one item was removed as it not well comprehend by the respondents during the pilot testing. Thus, this study proceeds to conduct real data collection after the issue has been resolved.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha value of the variables

Variable(s)	No. of items	Item deleted	Cronbach's Alpha (Pre-Test, n=40)	Cronbach's Alpha (Post-Test, n=400)
Logo	4		0.860	0.834
Facilities	4		0.728	0.772
Heritage	3	HE1	0.813	0.788
Image	4		0.815	0.826
Reputation	4		0.784	0.814

### Normality Test

For the normality, kurtosis, and skewness of the variable were analyzed to determine whether it conforms to the normal distribution. Skewness is a measure of the asymmetry of the variable distribution, while the kurtosis value is a measure of the peakedness of the data distribution. According to Siddiqi (2014), the data can be considered normally distributed when the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables were in the range of -2 to +2, with 5% sampling errors. Based on Table 2, the skewness values of all variables range from -0.136 to 0.189, and the kurtosis coefficient is -0.541 to 0.178, which are between the range of -2 and +2, so, the data is the approximately normal distribution and multivariate analysis can be carried out.

In addition, the existence of multicollinearity is tested, and the results are shown by tolerance and variance inflation factors (VIF). According to Daoud (2017), if the tolerance value is less than 0.2 or 0.1, and the VIF value is above 10, it indicates that there is a presence of a multicollinearity problem. The results in Table 2 show that the tolerance values of all variables range from 0.283 - 0.507 (greater than 0.2) and the range of VIF values range from 1.972 - 3.530 (less than 10), thus, indicating that there is no multicollinearity issue happened between variables and it will not mislead the detection of statistical significance.

Table 2. Skewness, Kurtosis, tolerance, and VIF of the variables

Variable(s)	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	VIF
Logo	6.00	20.00	-.136	-.004	.300	3.338
Facilities	5.00	20.00	.189	.178	.353	2.834
Heritage	4.00	15.00	.117	-.296	.283	3.530
Brand Image	5.00	20.00	-.120	-.541	.507	1.972
<b>Reputation</b>	5.00	20.00	-.059	-.167		

### Data collection procedure

The study collected the data virtually, where a structured online questionnaire was distributed to the students/ customers (local and international) of the private university understudied. The online surveys (Google form) are circulated via WhatsApp, Facebook, and WeChat groups of the university. The researchers assured the respondents of the data confidentiality and anonymity through the cover page of the online instrument as a process in the research ethics.

### 4. Results & Discussion

Based on Table 3, 46.3% of the respondents are male, while 53.8% of the respondents are female. Therefore, there are relatively equal numbers of gender. For the category of students, it showed that there are 56.3% are local students, while 43.8 % are international students. For the age of the students, the students who are within the age of 25-29 years old constituted more than half (50.2%) of the respondents. Hence, this analysis showed that respondents are mainly young adults. For the race group, it showed that respondents who are Chinese made up 31.3%, followed by Malay (30.8%) Indians (26.5%), and other ethnic groups comprised of (11.5%). In addition, Table 3 also demonstrated that the respondents who have Bachelor's degree 48.3%, followed by respondents with a Master's degree (35.3%). Thus, it showed that the respondents are educated and able to make wise judgments and decisions.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of respondents (n=400)

Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	185	46.3
Female	215	53.8
<b>Student</b>		
Local	225	56.3
International	175	43.8
<b>Age (years old)</b>		
20-24	45	11.3
25-29	201	50.2
30-34	109	27.3
35-39	34	8.5
40-44	11	2.8
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	123	30.8
Chinese	125	31.3
Indian	106	26.5
Others	46	11.5
<b>Education</b>		
Foundation	13	3.3
Diploma	42	10.5
Bachelor Degree	193	48.3
Master Degree	141	35.3
Ph.D	11	2.8

The Durbin-Watson’s value was 2.196 which is between the values of 1 to 3, indicating that there were no auto-correlations that arose from the statistical regression analysis. Table 4 shows the results of multiple regression analysis of the university's reputation with the predictors. The R-value of .790 shows a high correlation between university reputation and the predictor variables. The analysis of variance with  $F = 163.554$  is found to be significant at .05 level of significance. While all four (4) predictors collectively contribute 62.4 % of the variation. The analysis clearly shows that tangible resources (university logo, university facilities), as well as intangible resources (university heritage and university image), are the factors that contribute towards the university's reputation, with the university heritage as a prominent predictor. However, there are some other variables (37.6%) that are currently not being investigated in this study, which can contribute to the increase of the university's reputation. Hence, H1 to H4 was supported.

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis of university reputation with predictor variables

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p
Logo	0.635	0.118	0.658	5.390	0.000
Facilities	0.776	0.160	0.619	4.856	0.000
Heritage	0.853	0.152	0.673	5.603	0.000
Image	0.818	0.105	0.783	7.771	0.000

$F = 163.554$      $df1 = 4, df2 = 395$      $P = 0.000$   
 $R = 0.790$      $R^2 = 0.624$     Adjust  $R^2 = 0.620$

The current findings aligned with the results of previous studies (Hattwig et al., 2013; Foroudi et al., 2020a) that logos have a positive impact on reputation, thus, H1 is supported. Based on the findings, it can be confirmed that visual literacy, the ability to understand and create visual information, and a logo can provide knowledge about the identity of the university as they can instantly promote the identity to the stakeholders and community. Furthermore, it also supported the notion of Iftach and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2019), who indicates that the logo of a university is a totem, which transforms the abstract language of school philosophy, cultural characteristics, professional characteristics, and behavior patterns into an organized, systematic and standardized visual scheme.

Besides, the findings also showed that university facilities impact a university's reputation positively which accepted H2. The results were congruent with the findings of numerous past studies (Bakrie et al., 2019; Ngan & Khoi, 2020; Virappan & Chan, 2020). This also further supported the notion of Weerasinghe and Fernando (2018) who found that high-quality and high-standard facilities are considered to have a great impact on student's choice of academic institutions, which will affect the student's learning process and the overall view of the university, which in turn will transform become a favorable reputation.

In addition, the H3 is also accepted, wherein university brand heritage positively impacts the university's reputation which aligned with past studies (Raharjo, 2020; Balmer & Chen, 2017; Foroudi et al., 2020b; Zeren & Kara, 2021). Balmer (2013) highlighted that corporate heritage institutions are of immeasurable value to the organization. For students, all inherited universities are also an intangible resource of their status, as students prefer to choose a university with a long history because such a university has a high degree of popularity, which allows them to speak more proudly of their university. A related study by Merchant et al. (2015) concluded that the key to the competitiveness and creativity of modern universities lies in the inheritance of excellent culture. The essence of the modern university is the inheritance based on the accumulation and creation of profound cultural deposits. Therefore, the university heritage is crucial because it affects students' perceptions, emotions, and intentions of the brand, and increases their attachment to the focal brand.

Lastly, the study also supported H4, where university image was positively related to the university's reputation which supported the study (de Leaniz & del Bosque Rodríguez, 2016; Foroudi et al., 2019; Foroudi et al., 2020b; Irfan et al., 2020). Del-Castillo-Feito et al., (2019) and Jang et al., (2019) found that reputation and brand image interchangeably, and both corporate image and reputation are intangible, which influence one another. However, the findings of the study argued that the two constructs are different (Podnar & Golob, 2017). Additionally, Panda et al. (2019) revealed that brand image will affect student satisfaction, which is reflected in reputation, as the brand image will affect the reputation of the university. Based on the discussion, image is the mental picture/ representation of the mind of the customers, and reputation is much more stable as it is an accumulation of the past actions of the institution/firm.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study intends to investigate the tangible resources and intangible resources on a university's reputation to form a competitive advantage based on RBV theory. The empirical results demonstrated that tangible resources (e. g., university logo & facilities), and intangible resources (e. g. university brand heritage & image) were the predictors of university reputation, where university brand heritage appears to be the prominent predictor among all the other determinants.

### *Academic implications*

The current study contributes to the body of knowledge in the field of corporate communication and marketing literature, where the tangible and intangible resources were supported and found pertinent in the Malaysian private HEIs setting. In addition, the theoretical linkage between tangible and intangible resources and university reputation through the application of RBV theory which creates a competitive advantage for the institution was also established. Most important, the study clarifies the gaps between image and reputation literature as the two constructs are distinctive and different (Podnar & Golob, 2017), which provides empirical evidence to the reputation management literature.

### *Practical implications*

The current results help the management and marketing department of the university to understand that tangible and intangible resources can serve as marketing tools to build a solid reputation. Hence, the management of the private HEI should carefully craft its logo, as the logo and visual presentation signify the institution, and a glorious logo can help the university to differentiate itself from the competitors.

Besides, the management of the university also has to focus on the facilities of the university by refurbishing the building/ labs to make it more presentable, as well as making sure the classroom facilities are equipped with modern technologies (e.g. smart board) and other technological devices, as the bigger percentage of the students who enrolled to study are mostly Gen-Z and above who are technology savvy. The library should also equip with e-books that will cater to the new learning style and classroom environment.

Most important, the management of the university should advertise their success stories in the form of a bulletin and advertise it on various social media platforms, where this will help the current as well as the potential students to know the history and heritage of the university better. Besides, the marketing department and faculty of the university should also identify the potential alumni to get their good reviews as testimonials and publish them on the university's official website, this not only can help to create a good impression (images) in the eyes of the stakeholders, but it also can serve as a branding tool to promote the university brand heritage through worth-of-mouth, either physically or virtually.

#### ***Limitations & Suggestions for future study***

There are several limitations found in this research. Firstly, this study only focused on one private university in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized. Therefore, future research can focus on other private universities as well as public universities, so that comparison studies can be carried out and have insightful findings.

Additionally, this study only focused on the quantitative approach and look from the customers'/ students' perspective. To achieve deeper findings, future studies can focus on a mixed-method approach (pragmatics), by interviewing the university management and marketing department officers, potential students, alumni, and parents to gain their views on how to manage the reputation of the institutions, as the qualitative approach will provide more in-depth answers from the informants which are crucial to enhance validity and reliability of the study.

Last but not least, this study only examined the direct path of the determinants of the university's reputation based on RBV theory. Future research can inculcate other potential constructs such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, competitive advantage, and innovation capabilities to test the mediating and moderating effects to expand the current framework. Future studies can also examine the different views of international and local students on their perception of the university's reputation through multi-group analysis (MGA). This will surely enhance corporate communication and marketing scholarship in the higher education context.

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