



Higher education reputation management through increasing the role of public relations

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ABSTRACT

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A university's reputation is an important factor in winning the competition and ensuring sustainability. The reputation built by a university must be about its vision and mission. Reputation needs to be managed professionally by an organization namely quality public relations as the spearhead in delivering and communicating information to all university stakeholders. This research aims to formulate how to manage the reputation of higher education by increasing the role of public relations. The research method used is a descriptive analysis method that combines surveys through questionnaires and in-depth interviews with stakeholders as the main informants. It can be concluded that public relations play an important role in managing higher education reputation based on the results of the research. The built reputation must be based on the values adopted because they become the guideline and direction of the college's development goals. A university's reputation is influenced by accreditation, quality of graduates, human resources, leadership, college rankings, facilities, curriculum, services, community service and innovation, publications and collaborations. Negative factors such as violence, bullying, plagiarism and diploma forgery have the potential to reduce reputation. In reputation management, public relation has a role as a liaison to stakeholders in conveying information about the reputation of higher education. Public relations must manage negative factors that can reduce reputation. The results of this study will be a reference for further research.

Contribution/Originality: This study enhances the knowledge gap by developing a chart that places public relations as the spearhead and interface in the collection and dissemination of information to build the reputation of higher education institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Competition among universities is currently intensifying (Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando, Zorrilla, & Forcada, 2018). Universities are not only higher education institutions but have also become business institutions, so it is necessary to improve their reputation to gain public trust for the university. As a case study, the number of universities in Indonesia in 2023 is 4448 and in Jakarta, the number of universities is 282 based on the higher education database from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. Various universities have an impact on the level of competition to gain the trust of the community and partners in the development of higher education.

In general, reputation is the main requirement to win the competition and ensure survival. Reputation helps companies develop and maintain their existence by creating the right communication strategy. Reputation is a representation of the perception of past actions and prospects derived from the evaluation of various stakeholder groups which describes the overall attractiveness of the company when compared to its main competitors (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). Reputation can be formed from customer experiences even if not experienced directly but can be conveyed by word-of-mouth through other publications (Caruana, 1997). Many organizations are increasingly aware of the importance of reputation to achieve business goals and remain competitive (Argenti & Druckemiller, 2004).

College reputation is the impression received by stakeholders as a result of communication and interaction including with students (Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005; Sung & Yang, 2008). Universities must implement a competitive advantage plan to dominate the competition by developing a reputation (Ivy, 2008; Thomas, 2011). Rankings of universities, public opinion, positive media coverage, innovative output, social responsibility, service, institutional governance, environment and working conditions, leadership, research and development, student mentoring, university legacy and the quality of university services are all indicators of a university's reputation (Munisamy, Mohd Jaafar, & Nagaraj, 2014; Qazi, Qazi, Raza, & Yousufi, 2021).

One strategy that is thought to be successful in enhancing a university's reputation is to give public relations more responsibility and prioritize the function of the company's or organization's reputation. Public relations is part of communication management with all forms of planned communication both inside and outside the organization and between an organization and all its audiences to achieve specific objectives (Grunig, 2013). The public relations function, when associated with reputation aims to gain support and influence public opinion. The role of public relations is very important in maintaining, improving and fostering good organizational relationships with potential customers to achieve organizational goals (Tworzydło, 2016).

The number of private universities that have a public relations organization is only 45% of 282 based on preliminary research conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia. Some of the reasons why private higher education do not have a public relations organization are due to lack of support from the leadership, limited resources and budget, more focus on the academic field and different management policies. Another issue is the non-optimal role and function of public relations as a manager of communication and information to the public due to difficult access to information, a lack of appreciation for the work of public relations, the unclear position of public relations in the organizational structure, the unavailability of work guidelines as standard procedures and an inadequate budget to carry out tasks.

The focus of this research is how to manage higher education reputation by increasing the role of public relations in exploring and managing positive and negative elements that can affect the reputation of universities, thereby increasing public trust in universities which has an impact on the sustainability of higher education in the future based on the aforementioned background.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reputation management is the ability of an organization to build its reputation, identity and image in terms of improving business performance and organizational goals. The basis for building a reputation is integrity, consistency, perseverance and desire (Money & Gardiner, 2005). Reputation management attempts to manage the relationship between the company and the company's public through appropriate media to create and maintain a positive public perception, thus preventing a fragmented reputation and maintaining the good name of the organization to achieve strategic and financial goals (Alsharairi & Jamal, 2021; Argenti & Druckemiller, 2004; Gibson, Gonzales, & Castanon, 2006; Helm, 2007).

According to Brewer and Zhao (2010), university reputation is related to leadership, teaching, research, equity, and service. Oktar and Çarıkçı (2012) also conceptualized it into five dimensions, namely emotional appeal, quality of education and services, vision and leadership, work environment and social responsibility. Six components

influence university reputation namely social contribution, environment, leadership, funding, research and development and guidance to students.

In general, universities that have a good reputation, trustworthy leadership and a good image in society will have a very positive impact on their future. According to [Sung and Yang \(2008\)](#) in the university context, a relationship between students and measure university reputation by adopting a revised version of [Fombrun et al. \(2000\)](#) which includes emotions, university management, perceived media reputation and perceived academic reputation.

It takes time and effort to establish a university's reputation but if it is not managed well, it can be quickly lost or damaged ([Hall, 1992; Telci & Kantur, 2014](#)). Management of a university's reputation is necessary to have a major influence on the internal functioning of the university and consequently, the quality of university education ([Steiner, Sundström, & Sammalisto, 2013](#)).

[Amado and Juarez \(2022\)](#) stated that stakeholders have an affinity with the university because it will affect the reputation and sustainability of the university in a competitive environment. [Amado and Juarez \(2022\)](#) developed a university reputation management model that was the result of a literature review of 90% of articles that discussed reputation in higher education institutions. The articles were published over ten years (2010-2020) in Q1 and Q2 journal categories with 37 and 19 articles respectively. The coverage area of the countries studied consists of the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, China, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Finland, Ireland, and Australia. The findings of [Amado and Juarez \(2022\)](#) provide a very comprehensive model of university reputation management since they include four interconnected components: components that impact reputation, advantages associated with reputation and components related to internal and external stakeholders.

Researchers identified study gaps by referring to several kinds of studied sources especially in terms of how to connect universities' established reputations with the public on both an internal and external level. This includes how the flow of information out of the college needs to be communicated to the public and how information from the public enters the college. One answer to the research gap in the college reputation management system is how to use public relations to spearhead an interface between the college and the public in an effective reciprocal relationship.

Public relations is a management function that identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization with the public interest, implements action programs to gain public understanding and acceptance, and evaluates public attitudes ([Hallahan, 2001; Page & Fearn, 2005](#)). It helps organizations to listen, appreciate and provide appropriate responses to people or groups who have a mutually beneficial relationship with the organization in achieving its vision and mission. It is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. It has a function to manage communication between the organization and its public professionally, to maintain, improve reputation, anticipate, analyse and interpret public opinion, facilitate the problem-solving process, facilitate communication, communicate clear messages and manage the media process ([Grunig, 2013](#)).

The role of public relations as a communicator in higher education institutions is at the forefront for informing higher education programmes and performance, sources and managers of information and encouraging community participation in the success of higher education programmes. Public relations is seen as a crucial component of preserving an organization's image and communicating its information to clients, investors and the general public to cultivate a favorable opinion of the business. In this case, strengthening public relations in higher education institutions is necessary. Public relations has the function of managing communication between the organization and its public professionally to maintain and improve reputation ([Grunig, 2013](#)).

This research is crucial for managing and enhancing a university's reputation to compete with other institutions and significantly improve the quality of higher education. Public relations should serve as the main

focus and interface especially in light of the aforementioned literature review and the need to close knowledge gaps. Good reputation management in disseminating information and communication to all stakeholders both internal and external through public relations is needed to support the sustainability of higher education. The results of this study serve as guidelines for the implementation of a reputation management system that can be applied by universities especially private universities in Indonesia which are very numerous, diverse in quality and have very fierce competition in gaining the trust of the public. Guidelines can also be implemented creatively about the advantages built by higher education.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research aims to formulate how to manage the reputation of universities by increasing the role of public relations. The focus of this research is to explore the positive and negative elements that can affect the reputation of universities as well as how to manage reputation through information dissemination and communication carried out by public relations to all stakeholders. The reputation of a university cannot be separated from the values, vision and mission of the university to be achieved, various works produced by the academic community, internal and external recognition of university performance, partnerships built with all stakeholders and various other achievements that must be published to the wider community (see Figure 1).

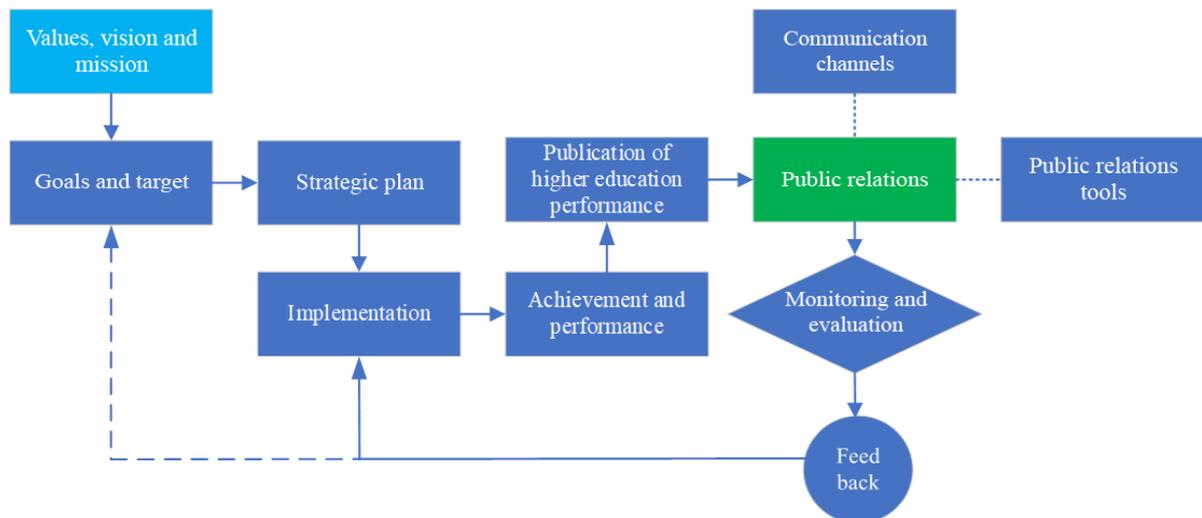


Figure 1. Public relations implementation framework.

This research uses mixed methods with a sequential explanatory design model. This research combines quantitative and qualitative research methods, data collection and analysis in a single study where data are collected simultaneously or sequentially by giving priority. The quantitative study stage carried out is to develop and make a questionnaire regarding the elements of increasing or decreasing the reputation of universities, tools and communication channels used by public relations in conveying information to stakeholders to be effective. The findings of the quantitative study will be further investigated through qualitative research involving forum group discussions and in-depth interviews with selected respondents. Based on the results of the quantitative study, it will then be explored by conducting qualitative studies through in-depth interviews and forum group discussions involving selected informants.

The research was conducted in the city of Jakarta by distributing questionnaires and in-depth interviews to stakeholders consisting of lecturers, students, employees, alumni, journalists, teachers, students, parents of students, industry partners and elements of the government through the Higher Education Service Agency Region III. The data obtained were then described and analyzed in-depth to produce findings related to reputation management through enhancing the role of public relations. A forum group discussion involving all stakeholders

was conducted as the final step to validate all research results involving experts and practitioners as informants to support and strengthen the findings in this study.

The research steps are as follows: (1) Develop a conceptual framework that describes the relationship between university reputation and public relations. (2) Gather data through surveys using questionnaires. (3) Deepen the results obtained from the questionnaires by conducting interviews with several informants. (4) Conduct forum group discussions with experts to validate the research results and develop a university reputation management system through empowering public relations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Positive Factors Affecting Higher Education Reputation

The survey of factors affecting the reputation of the university was conducted by distributing questionnaires and conducting interviews. A questionnaire was distributed to stakeholders consisting of lecturers, employees, students, alumni, school partners, namely teachers and students, industry partners and mass media, namely editors-in-chief and journalists to find out the factors that can positively influence reputation. The total number of respondents was 1936. The result obtained after data processing can be seen in Figure 2.

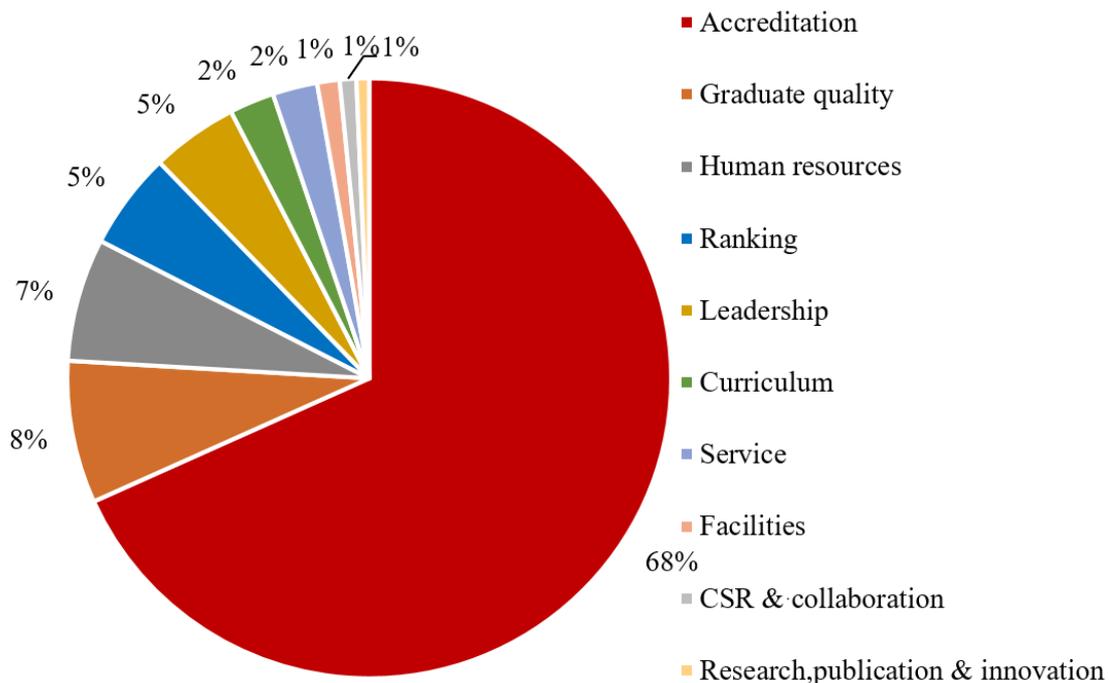


Figure 2. Positive factors that support university reputation.

Based on Figure 2, it is known that the positive factors affecting university's reputation by rank are (1) accreditation, (2) quality of graduates, (3) human resources, (4) leadership, (5) rank, (6) curriculum, (7) facilities, (8) services, (9) community service and collaboration, and (10) research, publications and innovation.

Higher education accreditation in the education system in Indonesia is very important and a priority to measure the quality of higher education. Accreditation is the main indicator that universities have met the National Higher Education Standards about the provisions of the Ministry of Education and Culture. It is one of the requirements that must be fulfilled so that universities can legally carry out their operations in Indonesia, so that their graduates can be accepted by the community. According to the regulation, accreditation is an assessment of the feasibility and quality of a higher education institution or study programme conducted by an independent institution. The objectives and benefits of university accreditation are (1) the university has met the quality

standard criteria, (2) the university can maintain high quality, (3) the university makes continuous improvements for sustainability.

Referring to Regulation of the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, assessment and accreditation instruments must measure the following dimensions in higher education: (1) higher education governance, (2) good higher education governance, (3) input quality, (4) process quality, (5) output quality and outcomes, (6) sustainability.

It can be concluded that accreditation has assessed the performance achievements of universities and study programmes in all aspects based on the description above. Therefore, the respondents' choice of the main factor determining the choice of higher education, namely accreditation has represented all aspects of the academic and non-academic activities of higher education both in terms of input, process, output and outcomes and by paying attention to the sustainability of the higher education in the future following the excellence that the higher education wants to build. Higher education public relations should be able to explore these findings as a reference in building information and communication with all stakeholders.

4.2. Negative Factors Affecting Higher Education Reputation

The researcher conducted interviews with university stakeholders consisting of students and journalists to explore the negative factors that have the potential to damage reputation. Based on the results of in-depth interviews, the researcher grouped the negative factors into two categories, namely those related to the academic and non-academic fields. Those included in the academic category are (1) plagiarism, (2) fake diplomas, (3) poor academic quality, (4) poor accreditation, (5) lack of achievement of students, lecturers, and alumni, (6) poor quality of graduates so that they are not looked at by users, (7) thesis, exam and paper jockeys. Negative factors affecting higher education reputation in the non-academic category are (1) campus security, (2) corruption, (3) fights between students, (4) bullying, (5) inadequate facilities, (6) violence, (7) tuition fees not proportional to the quality of services, facilities and learning systems, (8) sexual harassment, (9) negative media coverage, (10) declining number of applicants, (11) drugs, (12) dishonest behaviour, (13) low level of campus cleanliness, (14) human resources that lack quality, (15) poor building and environmental conditions, (16) lecturer behaviour that does not set an example, (17) students are entangled in fraudulent investments, (18) leaders or lecturers receive bribes, (19) acts of discrimination, (20) behaviour of the academic community that defames the university.

Public relations play an important role in managing problems or conditions in the event of a crisis by knowing the factors that can have a negative impact on campus reputation. Public relations and all elements in higher education must always monitor the situation and manage it so that things that can damage the reputation of the institution can be avoided.

4.3. Roles and Duties of Higher Education Public Relations

Universities are obliged to convey and manage the dissemination of information in a good, complete, accurate and reliable manner in accordance with Law No. 14 of 2008 concerning Public Information Disclosure in Indonesia. It is necessary to manage the organization's relationship with the public through the right media to prevent a fragmented reputation to brand a university and maintain a positive public perception of the organization (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Gibson et al., 2006; Helm, 2007). Managing relationships with the public is done by managing communication between the organization and the public to maintain and improve reputation (Grunig, 2013). Researchers surveyed to find out how important the public relations function is in higher education. The survey was conducted by distributing questionnaires to internal and external stakeholders of higher education consisting of lecturers, employees, students, alumni, school partners (teachers and students), industry partners,

universities, government and journalists totaling 1936 respondents. The questions asked related to the main sources of information about higher education. The results obtained after data processing can be seen in Figure 3.

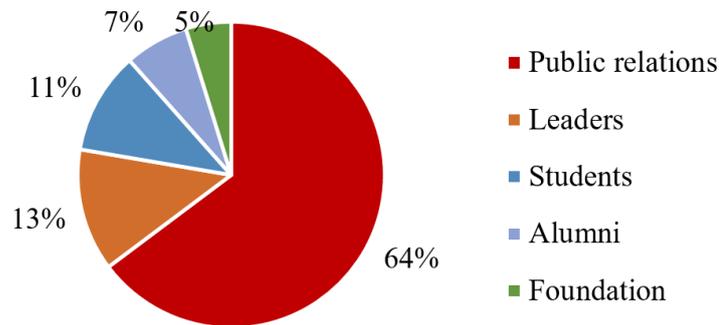


Figure 3. The primary source of higher education information.

The majority of respondents (64%) said that the main source of information for a university is public relations. Other sources of information are leaders, students, alumni and foundations with smaller percentages apart from public relations (see Figure 3). This shows that public relation has an important role as it is the main source of information for the public. Onsongo, Mberia, and Jjuuko (2017) said that PR has an important role in educational institutions. Many universities have established public relations units to improve communication with the public.

It was concluded that university public relations have seven roles based on the results of the study namely (1) as the spearhead of information publication, (2) as a communicator, (3) as a creator of ideas or activities, (4) as a facilitator or mediator, (5) as an executor, (6) as an evaluator and (7) as a problem or crisis manager.

In-depth interviews were conducted with informants representing the government, journalists, public relations practitioners and student representatives to validate the survey results. It can be concluded that the tasks of public relations are based on the results of in-depth interviews as follows: (1) internal communication, (2) external communication, (3) relations with the community, (4) relations with the media, (5) creating news or releases and content, (6) publication and documentation, (7) managing college media channels, (8) managing events/activities, (9) providing public information services, (10) carrying out planning, implementation, evaluation functions, (11) managing problems and crisis.

4.4. Communication Channels of Higher Education Public Relations

Researchers conducted a survey using a questionnaire to find out the communication channels and tools that can be used by higher education in conveying information to stakeholders to achieve effective communication. Stakeholders involved consisted of students, lecturers, employees, alumni, school teachers, high school students, journalists and industry with a total of 1936 respondents. The results obtained after data processing can be seen in Figure 4.

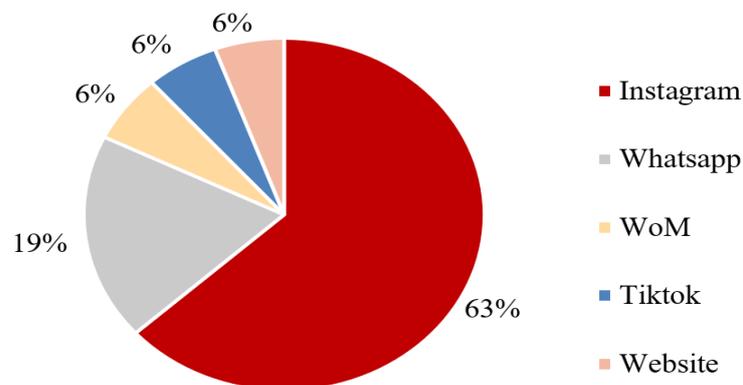


Figure 4. Communication channels used by stakeholders.

Based on Figure 4, communication channels that are widely used in communication are social media, Instagram, WhatsApp, word of mouth (WoM), TikTok and websites. Technology-based communication channels have become popular communication channels today as they provide interactive communication facilities. Yeniçifti (2016) said that in modern society, social media plays an important role for individuals and organizations in maintaining their targets which can be a basic tool as a personal lifestyle and an activity delivery tool for organizations because people's communication styles have developed and changed rapidly from internet-based communication technology, smartphones and so on. Organizations can find opportunities to reach several different target groups and can save time and costs with social media.

4.5. Communication Tools for Higher Education Public Relations

The goal of public relations is to create a mutually influential and beneficial relationship between the company and society (Jelinkova, Lošťáková, & Macháčková, 2020; Sommerfeldt, Yang, & Taylor, 2019). To achieve this goal, public relations can be supported by various tools for conveying information. Researchers have surveyed internal and external stakeholders in higher education (n=1936), the results of which can be seen in Figure 5.

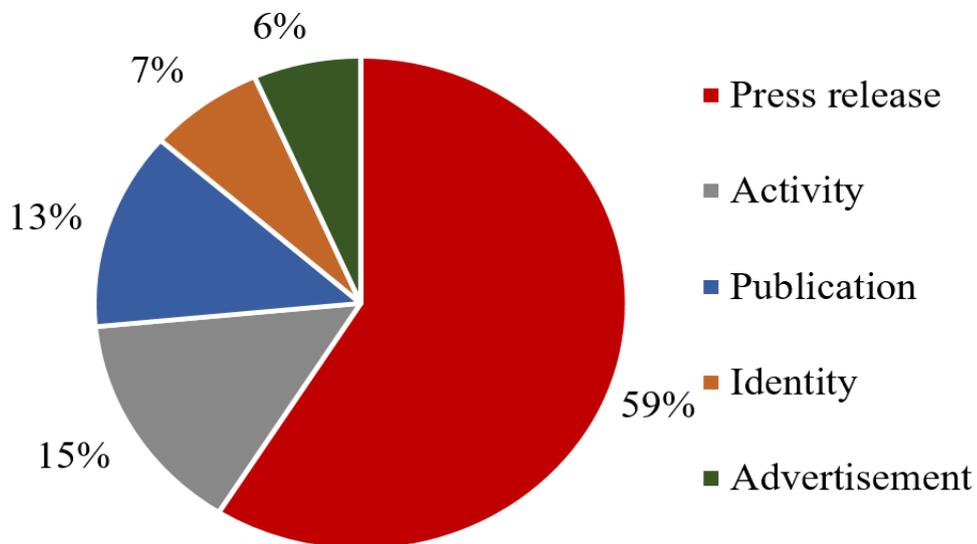


Figure 5. Higher education public relations tools.

Based on Figure 5, the first choice of public relation tools for higher education stakeholders is press releases followed by campus activities, print and digital publications, campus identity and advertising. Organizations can develop their reputation through information collected and delivered to stakeholders through the media, press releases, websites, online resources and word-of-mouth.

The key findings of this research can be depicted in a chart that shows the important role of public relations as the forefront and interface in the collection and dissemination of information to build the reputation of universities (see Figure 6). The relationship between the achievement of university reputation and the role of public relations in managing reputation internally and externally that has been developed can be a reference in the development of public relations organizations especially private universities that face various challenges of increasingly fierce competition to gain public trust.

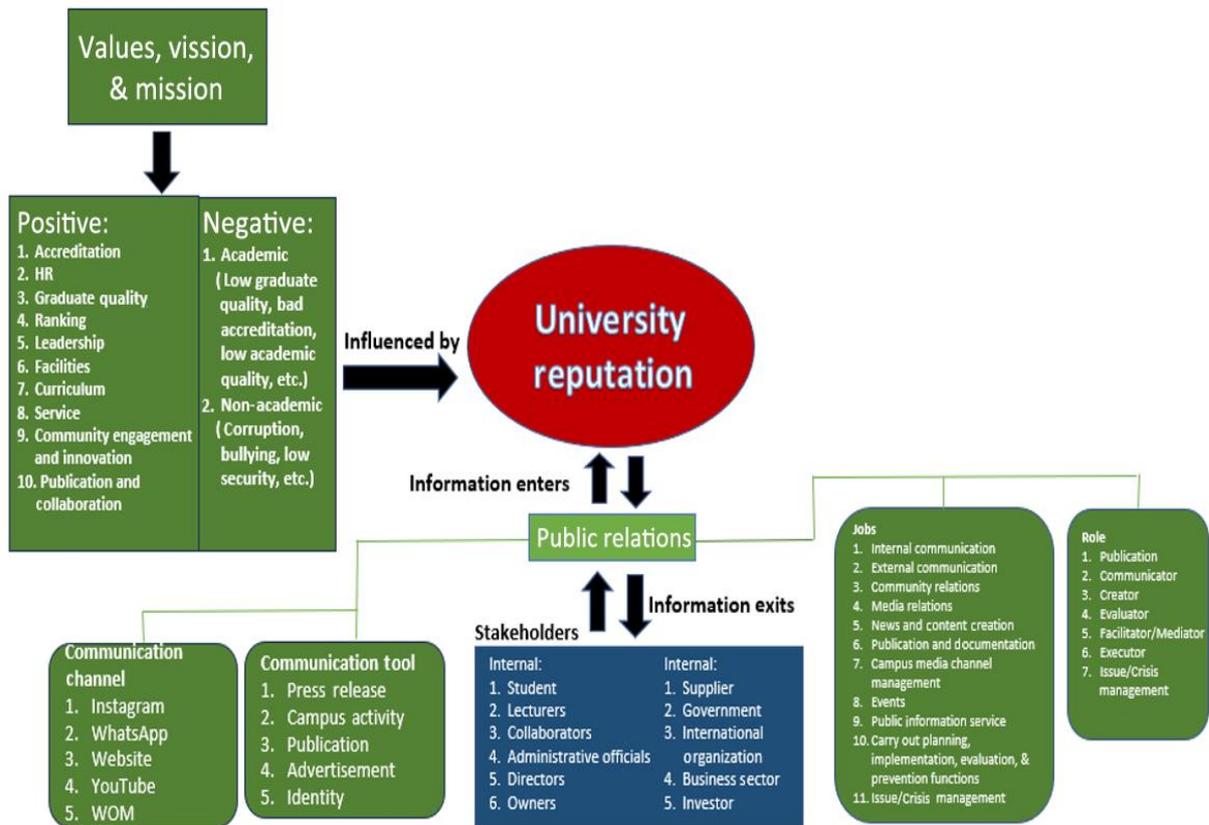


Figure 6. The relationship between the achievement of university reputation and the role of PR in managing reputation internally and externally.

5. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that public relations has a very important role in the higher education management system, namely as an interface in managing outgoing and incoming information and communication to and from stakeholders both internal and external based on the results of the research that has been conducted. Public relations manages negative factors that can reduce reputation and massively publicizes factors that can increase reputation. The reputation of universities is strongly influenced by accreditation factors, quality of graduates, human resources, leadership, rankings, facilities, curriculum, services, community service, innovation, publications and cooperation. These factors must be managed by public relations by using various media and communication channels so that they reach all stakeholders.

Suggestions for further research include expanding the number of respondents and research objects according to different college clusters.

Additionally, creating operational guidelines for higher education public relations organizations will provide a reference for carrying out public relations tasks and developing the reputation of higher education institutions in alignment with their respective values.

The implication of the research theoretically is that the university reputation management system developed by placing public relations as the spearhead and interface refers to the reputation management model developed by Amado and Juarez (2022).

The practical implication of this research is that public relations needs to understand the role and duties appropriately as a work function and be equipped with supporting work facilities, namely communication channels and PR devices so that communication is effective.

For universities that do not yet have a public relations organization, it is necessary to establish it immediately, so that reputation management can be carried out in a structured and sustainable manner.

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