



Strategic communication in promoting the organisation and academic services of research universities in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The development of an education-based economy, the internationalisation of institutions, and the growth of a global higher education hub has brought numerous changes to the field of higher education in the 21st century. This development encourages competition between universities to promote and market their organisation and academic services as an effort to dominate the higher education market. To understand better their efforts, this study explores the implementation of strategic communication by research universities in Malaysia to promote their organisation and academic services. The study specifically focuses on the efforts carried out by three main research universities in Malaysia: Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). This exploratory study employed a qualitative method that involved in-depth interviews with the management staff of Responsibility Centers (PTj) that implement strategic communication. The findings demonstrate that all three research universities adopted a generic strategy that influences the selection of marketing communication approaches in implementing their strategic communication. This approach involves communication strategies such as effective advertising, reach through a variety of media channels, online presence, and higher visibility of corporate profile. These strategies are aimed at promoting the academic organisations and services at both the local and international levels based on their strategic communication framework.

Keywords: *Strategic communication, research university, marketing communication, generic visibility, academic services, promotion*

THE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT, CHALLENGES AND TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The 21st century has witnessed two significant changes in higher education: the rise of education-based economics and the internationalisation of institutions, leading to the development of global higher education hubs (Abidin et al., 2020; De Filippo et al., 2012; Perera et al., 2023). These major shifts have spurred universities to promote their organisations and market their academic services to both local and global markets, aiming to attract students worldwide and increase student enrollment. Malaysia too has intensified its marketing efforts, collaborating with Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and universities to position itself as an international education hub for foreign students (“EMGS”, 2022).

This is in line with the demands of the global higher education market, where universities must promote their organisations and services at various levels (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). The significance of marketing strategies is also emphasised in Malaysia’s Education Development Plan (Higher Education) 2015-2025, focusing on promoting universities internationally. Therefore, most universities today, especially research universities, prioritise marketing activities to promote their organisations and academic services.

Despite the growing emphasis on marketing activities as a primary strategy for promoting higher educational institutions, there is limited understanding on how strategic communication can be specifically implemented in this context. While the effectiveness of marketing activities in promoting and attracting the interest of the target audience is well-documented (Gordon-Isasi et al., 2022; Nicolescu, 2009; Perera et al., 2023), the detailed mechanisms through which strategic communication operates within research universities remain underexplored. More exactly, while Malaysia’s efforts to position itself as an international education hub are well-documented (Bernama, 2022), the specific communication strategies and their effectiveness in achieving this goal have not been thoroughly examined.

In this context, this study examines how research universities in Malaysia use strategic communication to promote their organisations and academic services. By looking at the strategies they use, the study aims to better understand the role of strategic communication in higher education marketing. Effective promotion through these strategies can lead to economic benefits, such as increased student enrollment, which helps universities financially and support the broader economy by growing the education sector, creating jobs, and encouraging international collaborations. This research addresses a gap in the literature by providing insights into how strategic communication influences university promotion, student attraction, and related economic benefits. In the broader context of media and communication studies, this research highlights the critical role of strategic communication in shaping public perception and engagement with higher educational institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In discussing strategic communication within marketing contexts, numerous studies have explored its role and applications. Researchers like Klee and Hennig (1996), Gummesson (1999), and Hennig-Thurau (2000) have investigated its use in customer retention and relationship quality, emphasising its importance for enhancing quality and maintaining strong customer relationships. Similarly, Agil et al. (2022), Enke and Borchers (2022), Pöyry et al. (2021), and Sng et al. (2019) have studied strategic communication amongst

social media influencers, highlighting strategies like content production and interaction to effectively promote organisations and services. Additionally, studies by Camilleri and Isaias (2021), Chan et al. (2020), Heslin and Sa (2022) as well as Mogaji et al. (2021) examined strategic communication within the stakeholder relationship management, particularly through platforms like Twitter, emphasising its significance in recruiting students and maintaining stakeholder relationships.

However, while these studies provide valuable insights into various aspects of strategic communication, a specific gap remains regarding its role in directly promoting organisations and services, particularly within the context of higher education. Previous research, such as those aforementioned, has largely focused on broader marketing and communication strategies without delving into the unique approaches and impacts of strategic communication in promoting academic institutions and their offerings.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating how three research universities in Malaysia implement strategic communication to promote their organisations and academic services. By analysing the selection and execution of communication strategies within these universities, this study seeks to advance our understanding of how strategic communication contributes to achieving institutional goals. In doing so, it will provide a more nuanced understanding of its application within higher education marketing communication, setting it apart from existing research.

Strategic communication: Selection and implementation of approaches

As explained by Frandsen and Johansen (2017), strategic communication is often the primary choice of organisations at various levels. This selection is influenced by the effectiveness of strategic communication in helping the organisation achieve certain goals and missions. This aligns with Hallahan et al. (2007), who relate strategic communication to purposeful communication used by individuals, groups, or organisations to achieve specific goals and objectives. Strategic communication is effective not only in delivering messages and information but also in ensuring that the resulting outcome aligns with its purpose. What are the factors that make strategic communication so effective in delivering messages and information and ensuring that the resulting outcome is in line with its purpose?

Two main factors have been identified that make strategic communication effective: the selection of an appropriate communication approach followed by its systematic and planned implementation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). These factors not only guarantee the effectiveness of delivery but also ensure that the resulting outcome meets the intended purpose. The implementation of strategic communication emphasises the selection of an appropriate communication approach, as each approach has its own methods and produces different communication effects.

In line with its definition of purposeful communication used to achieve specific missions and goals, the implementation of strategic communication needs to focus on a communication approach that coincides with its goal (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). For example, if the goal is to form a relationship between the organisation and stakeholders, the public relations approach is appropriate. Similarly, technical communication is implemented by the organisation's management to provide information and task instructions to employees. Therefore, the selection and implementation of the appropriate communication approach is crucial in strategic communication.

Hallahan et al. (2007) outlined six communication approaches often found and practised in organisational management: management communication, public relations, marketing communication, political communication, technical communication, and information/social marketing campaigns. Each approach has its purpose and produces

specific communication effects. For instance, management communication regulates the organisation's operations to become more organised and systematic (Hallahan et al., 2007).

In contrast, the public relations approach involves handling communication activities in various departments such as publicity, human resources, finance, and government relations, with a focus on building and maintaining mutual benefits between the organisation and stakeholders. Marketing communication creates awareness and promotes products or services offered by the organisation, and is typically managed by the marketing and advertising department (Hallahan et al., 2007).

Next, political communication aims to build political agreement and recognition of current issues, often associated with management groups such as politicians, government relations officers, and party supporters. Additionally, technical communication involves educating employees, customers, and others to improve service efficiency, while information/social marketing campaigns focus on promoting social effects benefiting the community (Hallahan et al., 2007).

Each communication approach has its focus of use, emphasising the importance of selecting an appropriate approach to meet implementation requirements. Additionally, the effectiveness of strategic communication is influenced by phases of its implementation: planning, implementation, and evaluation.

The planning phase focuses on setting the agenda for communication activities to ensure they align with the organisation's mission and goals. The implementation phase involves executing the communication plan, including selecting the target audience, crafting appropriate messages, choosing effective communication channels, and coordinating with stakeholders. The evaluation phase assesses the effectiveness of the communication plan through methods like communication audits, allowing organisations to identify strengths and weaknesses and make improvements for future implementations (Mahbob et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the selection of an appropriate approach and its systematic implementation is crucial in contributing to the effectiveness of strategic communication as purposeful communication used to achieve specific goals and missions.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, a qualitative method involving in-depth interviews was chosen. In-depth interviews entail face-to-face interactions with selected research informants (Marican, 2005). This method was selected to gather and examine the insights and experiences shared by management individuals involved in promoting their universities and academic services, both internationally and locally.

The interview process involved 20 management individuals, including Directors, Deputy Directors, and Executive Officers. The semi-structured interview encompassed questions about their experiences and perspectives on strategic communication activities carried out by their university to promote research and academic services, tailored to each center and section's role.

Purposive sampling was used to select 20 management individuals as study informants. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to add more informants who met the study's criteria and requirements, as suggested by existing informants.

The study focused on three major research universities in Malaysia: Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). As research universities, they are required to carry out marketing activities to promote their institute and academic services, aligning with the mission and goals of Malaysian research universities to internationalise and build a global higher education hub.

Data collection occurred in three stages corresponding to the study locations. At UM, data collection involved two centers and two offices: Marketing and Recruitment Center (MRC), Global Planning and Strategy Center (PPSG), International Relations Office (IRO), and Corporate Communications Office (CCO). Seven management individuals participated in the interview sessions.

At UKM, the study focused on the International Relations Center (UKM Global), the Corporate Communications Office (PKK), and the UKM Strategy Center, involving five management individuals. Lastly, at UPM, data collection took place at the Office of Corporate Strategy and Communication, with eight management individuals participating.

To analyse the data obtained from the interview sessions, thematic analysis was carried out. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) based on research data acquisition (Guest et al., 2012). The analysis process entails categorising research data into main themes based on the frequency and description of statements by informants during the interviews.

For the data analysis, NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software was utilised. This software facilitated the organisation, coding, and management of the collected data, thereby enhancing the rigor and efficiency of the thematic analysis process.

To ensure validity, reliability, and validation of research findings, internal and external validation processes were conducted. Internally, the researcher repeated data analysis at different periods to ensure consistency in themes. Externally, participant validation was employed, where study informants confirmed and validated the research themes, ensuring alignment with their views presented during the interviews.

FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of the interview data, three main themes emerged with regard to the implementation of strategic communication in promoting the selected research universities and their academic services. These themes include a focus on promoting organisations and academic services in general, the implementation of marketing communication as the basis of strategic communication, and the implementation of a specific strategic communication approach to promote organisations and academic services.

Each of these themes sheds light on how UM, UKM, and UPM implement strategic communication as a whole, encompassing focused promotion efforts, the selection of appropriate communication approaches, and the execution of strategies to achieve their goals. By understanding these themes, we gain insights into how strategic communication is utilised to promote research universities in Malaysia. To provide a deeper understanding of the study's findings, the following sections detail each of the identified themes.

Focus on promotion of organisations and academic services in general

Two sub-themes highlighted the focus on promoting organisations and academic services in general: creating awareness of the university, its achievements, services, and academic products, as well as building a positive reputation and image. For the first sub-theme, most informants shared that the focus of their university was on creating awareness of its achievements, services, and product offering through strategic communication. The informants believed that awareness of the university's existence and presence is crucial in promoting the organisation and academic services. For example, Informant 4 mentioned that the university's ranking position serves as a selling point that can attract the attention of the target audience and boost the university's visibility:

Okay, from visibility, one of the biggest selling points is our ranking. Many of our partners or potential partners when they come here, the first thing they mention is that you know we are very highly ranked in Asia. You are very highly ranked and that is the selling point, one of the selling points...

(Informant 4, IRO, UM, January 2020)

Additionally, Informant 10, holding the position of Central Director at one of the related universities, expressed a similar opinion:

So, for me, visibility is important, because if people don't know you, how will people want to come, how will people want to deal with you? So, this visibility is for the right reason, it means because of academic excellence, student excellence or you know expertise at the international level. So, these things will contribute to our visibility.

(Informant 10, UKM Global, UKM, March 2020)

Informant 16 also emphasised the importance of creating general awareness of ranking achievements to promote the organisation and its academic services. This emphasis stems from the belief that the university's high-ranking position reflects the quality of education it offers. Such recognition can significantly impact the university's ability to attract the attention of international universities and industry partners for academic collaborations. Moreover, it serves as a magnet for both local and international students. Consequently, this goal becomes a cornerstone of the university's strategic communication efforts, both locally and internationally.

The second sub-theme revolves around creating a positive reputation and image for the university. This endeavor plays a crucial role in enticing the target audience and the market, shaping their perception of the university holistically. By cultivating a positive reputation and image, the university aims to establish a prominent presence, so that it is acknowledged within the global higher education market based on its demonstrated quality and esteemed status as an internationally reputable institution. Therefore, the cultivation of a positive reputation and image stands as a key objective that the university prioritises in its strategic communication.

Informant 7, an Acting Director, emphasised the importance of strategic communication in fostering a positive reputation and image for the university. He highlighted that this focus is crucial for attracting public attention to the university's presence and stature, particularly within the global higher education market. As someone responsible for overseeing the university's public relations activities, he underscored that cultivating a positive reputation and image is instrumental in building public trust and confidence in the university's education quality and brand. By doing so, the university's existence and presence becomes more prominent among the target audience and market, bolstered by the positive reputation and image it has garnered. Consequently, creating a positive reputation and image serves as a cornerstone for the university's strategic communication efforts in promoting its organisation and academic services.

Similarly, Informant 12 shares the opinion that the university's implementation of strategic communication focuses on amplifying its excellence in terms of reputation and fostering a positive image. This implementation aims to promote the organisation and its academic services:

...The second is the image that we will highlight as a superior higher education. Those who are near there are called selected, selected is not just any person nor is the language of people nowadays not canned.

(Informant 12, Strategi-UKM, UKM, September 2020)

Informant 13 also concurred with this perspective, elaborating on the university's emphasis on cultivating a positive reputation and image as part of its efforts to promote the organisation and its academic services. According to him:

...One of the things from the ranking earlier, we have an increased ranking, our achievements are good, our quality is good, we are recognized by the international side, abroad that increases, we have an international reputation, right? So, after that promotion, we go to our promotion, right? We have a name for international and other things. That's the method.

(Informant 13, CosComm, UPM, September 2020)

Marketing communication as the basis of strategic communication

The second theme highlights the adoption of a strategic communication approach, which aligns with the emphasis on promoting organisations and academic services as highlighted in the first theme. The majority of the study informants expressed opinions regarding the selection and execution of a marketing communication approach as the foundation for strategic communication at UM, UKM, and UPM. This approach was chosen to leverage the communication for promoting organisations and academic services as a whole. Within the second theme, two sub-themes were identified to elucidate how this communication approach is utilised to achieve the previously emphasised goals of strategic communication. The first involves the utilisation of communication for publicity and raising awareness of the university's organisations, services, and products. Additionally, marketing communication is employed to target the organisation's message towards both the intended market and the general market.

In the first sub-theme, study informants shared their experiences related to implementing the approach for publicity and awareness creation regarding the organisations, services, and academic products. This approach aims to enhance awareness among the target audience in line with efforts to promote academic organisations and services, whether at the local or international level. This sentiment was expressed by one of the informants, who serves as the Acting Director at one of the universities involved:

Yes, for example, every year we know that the university ranking results will come out. So, for the results of the university ranking, the CCO has already planned for a month what to play in the first week, what to play in the second week, what to play in the third week, and what to play in the fourth week. Go in there, VC goes to the radio station, VC goes to TV, CCO already has a plan...

(Informant 7, CCO, UM, October 2020)

Informant 8 concurred with this perspective, elaborating on the implementation of strategic communication through marketing communication for publicity and enhancing public awareness of the university's excellence across various domains. This involves showcasing achievements such as rankings and the spectrum of academic expertise possessed by the university. According to him, the process entails strategically disseminating communication and media announcements, meticulously planned to

highlight advancements in the university's ranking to underscore its academic prowess. He emphasised that such implementation is crucial for capturing the attention of both the target audience and the general public, serving as a primary driver for promoting the university and its academic services to the intended audience.

Similarly, another informant emphasised the university's focus on utilising marketing communication to enhance its visibility through media exposure, thereby promoting the organisation and its academic services. This underscores the following point:

Our visibility has two, two focuses. One local, one international. We have that, we want to highlight, right, we have visibility, right? For this local, we play a lot with the media. Because we take care of the media, we have a lot of visibility in the form of writing in newspapers and so on. Our officers or experts appear on TV and so on. (Informant 13, CosComm, UPM, September 2020)

Furthermore, the approach also involves directing the organisation's message towards the intended general market and specific target markets. A significant portion of the study's informants acknowledged the crucial role played by market awareness in promoting the organisation and its academic services. Strategic communication, anchored in this approach, is perceived as capable of effectively conveying the organisation's message to both the general and targeted markets. The direct transmission of the organisation's message holds the potential to captivate attention and influence not only the intended audience, but also the broader university community as a whole. One informant in the study highlighted the use of communication in channeling the organisation's message to both desired and general markets:

...Okay, the foreign media will depend on feeds from BERNAMA or ROUTERS. So, we target them, we release them for domestic use but sometimes they are picked up by foreign media. They will disseminate information related to the university directly to the international target market and audience. The media here will spread the story about us at the local level.

(Informant 7, CCO, UM, October 2020)

Informant 8 further highlighted the university's use of communication to disseminate its message to the broader market. This involves conveying and distributing the organisation's message through news production to both current stakeholders and potential students. According to him, disseminating the organisation's message widely to the market serves not only to share vital information but also to attract public attention to the university's existence and presence. Consequently, this approach can positively enhance the university's visibility through strategically targeted information dissemination in both desired and general markets, aligning with the goal of the university's strategic communication.

Similarly, another informant echoed the same sentiment regarding the use of marketing communication to disseminate organisational messages at both local and international levels, as part of the strategic communication:

If the research is for the local area only, it means that the announcement will only go to the local area. If the research goes abroad, for example, the bulletproof vest, overseas pickup too. So, when there is an advantage like that, the research is good, and overseas pick-up is good if we have a channel to spread the word abroad. (Informant 18, CosComm, UPM, September 2020)

Implementation of a strategic communication approach to promote the university and academic services

In line with the previous theme's emphasis on promotion and the selection of communication approaches, the third theme delves into the approach employed by the three research universities. Each of these approach elucidates the communication activities devised and executed by UM, UKM, and UPM, aligning with the overarching promotion focus and the chosen marketing communication for implementing strategic communication. Four subthemes were identified: effective implementation of advertising, multi-channel accessibility, online presence, and elevation of the university's profile.

Under the first sub-theme, study informants highlighted the utilisation of advertising as a key communication strategy prioritised by all three universities. This is undertaken to raise awareness of the organisation and promote the academic services offered by the university. The adoption of this advertising strategy is guided by its efficacy in delivering the organisation's message persuasively and its capacity to influence the target audience. Some study informants, particularly those involved in implementing online advertising strategies expressed these viewpoints regarding its proficiency in generating effective communication:

...So, for MRC, the most effective way to be, you know the online advertisement support with all communication systems that we decide on our own as well as the content marketing that we send through you know email or so ever later.

(Informant 1, MRC, UM, December 2019)

Maya, advertise in the virtual world, how is this virtual, what is all that? So we use all available approaches to continue selling, hahaha.

(Informant 9, PKK, UKM, August 2020)

After that, now we advertise a lot online. Now the promotion is still valid but has been done online.

(Informant 13, CosComm, UPM, September 2020)

The second sub-theme elucidates the importance of access through a diverse array of media channels. Based on this strategy, the universities harness a multitude of media platforms to disseminate the organisation's message to a target audience comprising diverse segments. Comprehensive access enables the universities to ensure that communication reaches every level of the audience. Most of the study informants acknowledged this aspect, sharing their experiences regarding the university's execution of this approach in implementing strategic communication:

We like to use different types of media... In social media we do have a team that includes all news events, include in that... Ummm, but PKK still does promotion and marketing in terms of preparing materials. For example, promotional materials, and pre-graduate brochures, all of that is what I have to do. The website as well, we are also moving towards a new website.

(Informant 8, PKK, UKM, July 2020)

We like to use various media such as FB, and social media... Newspapers only, because newspapers are the fastest... And we are also very much preferred or prioritized by broadcasting stations, radio, TV...

(Informant 7, CCO, UM, October 2020)

...So when we wanted to promote all that, we discovered that social media is the best way, okay. And how do we want to encourage people to go abroad, to welcome students, we have our students, our ambassadors. They also need to communicate through their social media. Let's say if we want to show visibility at the national level, I would show it as we go on TV, go on the radio, promote our activities, okay...

(Informant 10, UKM Global, UKM, March 2020)

Next, a strong online presence is also a key communication strategy adopted by the three research universities in their strategic communication. This is because most communication and information-seeking activities of the target audience today are primarily conducted through websites and social media. This shift has prompted the universities to implement online communication activities to disseminate information and promote university services. Several informants shared this perspective:

We have also changed the promotion, we used to have to be physically at the promotion place to bring all the promotional materials, but now we are the same, virtual exhibition. This is also a method so that we can increase visibility with the current situation. Now everything happens online, online-only...

(Informant 18, CosComm, UPM, September 2020)

Okay, we have our website. We have our website. We have we have beside the website we have we have Facebook. We have we have Instagram. We have we have Twitter. So, we have all that, social media we need that to be visible. This online method is very effective...

(Informant 11, UKM Global, UKM, August 2020)

We have to come out with this because, as you know it, go back to communicate, the comprehensive ways to communicate because when we have study@um, you can create this very how-to-say-like brand for communication. The one angle to look at this is you have study@um, then we have study@um, and you have study@um on Facebook and another platform. So, you can sort of synchronize when people see this, they will say this is from this office. Then I don't say from marketing, but I say from study@um. So, then they say if I want to go to your website, it is very easy to remember. Yeah, at the same time you know because we have done lots some online advertisements.

(Informant 1, MRC, UM, December 2019)

In addition to these three strategies, UM, UPM, and UKM also conduct profile-raising activities to promote their organisation and academic services. Most informants believed that enhancing the university's profile is the most effective method for providing information to the target audience regarding the organisation, achievements, and services offered. Through profile raising, the enhanced visibility acts as a promotional tool to attract interest and influence the target audience and the market as a whole. Raising the university's profile involves the production of content and exposure in the media designed to attract the interest of the target audience and the desired market. This perspective was shared by several informants:

Right, now human resources we have a lot of experts, a lot of good students, and a lot of people doing things, and they're the best in that already. So those are the points and also what we call the resources that we can tighten up and turn into a marketing strategy. (Informant 1, MRC, UM, December 2019)

Yes, there are many more achievements that we always highlight in our HIT, the newsletter that we distribute every month. That is one of the high-impact achievements. I don't remember all the things, but the meaning is that as far as we manage locally and internationally we manage to achieve as well... (Informant 9, PKK, UKM, August 2020)

We also focus on increasing the corporate profile. This is one of the ways we want to do this, update outsiders and promote the university. (Informant 13, CosComm, UPM, September 2020)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study identified three main themes that elucidate the implementation of strategic communication used by three main research universities in Malaysia, namely UM, UPM, and UKM to promote their institution and academic services. These themes encompass the focus on promoting the organisation and academic services in general, the implementation of marketing communication as the basis of strategic communication as well as the implementation of strategic communication approaches to promote the university and academic services. How are these themes related in explaining the implementation of strategic communication for university promotion and the academic services offered to the target audience, either locally or internationally by research universities in Malaysia?

As previously explained, strategic communication is purposeful communication used by individuals, groups, or organisations to achieve specific missions and goals. Its effectiveness is influenced by its ability to not only create effective communication but also to ensure that the resulting communication effect aligns with achieving the intended outcomes. This corroborates with scholars such as Hallahan et al. (2007). However, how can strategic communication ensure the effectiveness of delivery and the resulting communication effect?

The first theme identified, which is the focus on the promotion of organisations and academic services in general, provides insight into the promotional focus implemented by the selected research universities. This generic focus is crucial as it guides the implementation of strategic communication to achieve the focused mission and goal of promoting the organisation and its academic services effectively. We can observe how these three research universities emphasise the display of reputation and excellence through world academic rankings in their promotional efforts.

Generic promotion is highly effective in attracting the interest of the target audience because they prefer entities that are synonymous with superiority and reputation. Essentially, market segments perceive highly sought-after organisations and brands with a positive reputation and well-established excellence. This viewpoint is supported by scholars such as Marquis and Toffel (2012), who discuss the effectiveness of applying generic elements in promoting organisations to the target audience. Similarly, researchers like Yu et al. (2017) agree that generic promotion can enhance recognition among the target audience. Therefore, generic promotion emerges as an effective option for implementing strategic communication to promote a university and its academic services.

Aligned with the focus on promotion, the second theme, which is the implementation of marketing communication as the basis of strategic communication, explains the selection of the communication approach. Through this theme, we understand how marketing communication is employed by the three research universities to realise a generic promotional focus. The selection of this communication approach is pivotal, particularly in strategic communication, to ensure the delivery and effect of communication is aligned with the promotion focus.

Each communication approach has a distinct focus and effect, making the selection of an effective communication approach crucial to leveraging communication elements for promoting a university's reputation and achievements to the target audience (Hallahan et al., 2007). By employing marketing communication, the universities aim to publicise and influence the audience's decisions regarding their purchasing products or services. The resulting communication effect from this approach can enhance brand awareness and preferences among the target audience, as noted by Krizan et al. (2008). Hence, marketing communication emerged as the chosen communication approach for all three research universities in implementing their strategic communication to promote organisations and academic services due to its effectiveness and impact.

Next, the third theme, which is the implementation of strategic communication approaches to promote universities and academic services, delves into their statistical and implementation aspects. Besides ensuring alignment between the focus of promotion and the selection of the marketing communication approach, the implementation of an effective communication strategy is equally essential. The effectiveness of strategic communication implementation hinges on how well the communication strategy, formed through the selection of the marketing communication approaches, generates effective communication and influences the target audience. Thus, selecting an appropriate method is crucial to ensure that communication elements are applied accurately, as the method can influence the resulting effect and influence.

Therefore, formulating and implementing a communication strategy that outlines how the purpose can be achieved through the application of communication elements is imperative. This strategy should consider the influence and impact of communication created to ensure alignment with the purpose or outcome. In this context, the selected universities leverage marketing communication elements, such as effective advertising, multi-channel accessibility, online presence, and profile enhancement, to promote the university generically. Each marketing approach focuses on producing communication effects that influence the target audience in terms of enhancing brand awareness and preferences through highlighted generic features like reputation and excellence in world academic rankings.

In summary, this study shows how three research universities use strategic communication to promote their academic services. It highlights three key aspects: setting goals, choosing the right communication approach, and implementing the selected approaches. The study contributes to our understanding by highlighting the effective use of strategic communication to meet specific goals, detailing the process of selecting and applying communication strategies, and stressing the importance of generic promotion and marketing. Overall, it demonstrates how strategic communication can be applied in practice to align with organisational goals and enhance promotional effectiveness.

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