

## Examining the Impact of User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content on Brand Equity: The Mediating Role of Brand Credibility in Private Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

The increasingly fierce competition in higher education, especially among private universities, has driven a focus on enhancing brand equity with the goal of establishing a unique position through sustainable branding strategies. This research aims to examine the role of social media communication as a crucial factor in building brand equity. This communication involves User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content through brand credibility. Data was collected through electronic questionnaires from 300 students across four private universities. The gathered data was analyzed using PLS-SEM. The research results indicate that User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content have a positive influence on brand credibility. This research demonstrates that brand credibility mediates the relationship between User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content and brand equity. The study contributes to the branding literature by revealing essential elements in building brand equity in the higher education sector that require further attention. Additionally, this research provides insights to universities about the significant role of User-Generated Content in shaping brand credibility, ultimately contributing to brand equity development.

**Keywords:** User-Generated Content; Firm-Generated Content; brand credibility; brand equity; Private Higher Education

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Universities are currently situated within a highly competitive landscape due to the forces of globalization and the rapid advancements in digital technology. This competition encompasses several critical factors that exert substantial influence on the sustainability and reputation of universities. These factors include the recruitment of new students, research funding, the recruitment and retention of faculty and staff, reputation and rankings, technology adaptation, and the quality of education (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Tammubua, 2022). The awareness of this intense competition has driven universities to develop sustainable branding strategies (Khanna et al., 2019). Sustainable branding strategies serve as the fundamental basis for establishing and managing a robust brand identity for an organization. The growing importance of branding is not only evident in the creation of a strong and distinctive identity and image for universities but also in initiatives aimed at fostering effective and meaningful communication with prospective students. In a study conducted by Ho et al., (2020), it was observed that many universities in various countries have shifted their focus toward branding. This branding encompasses not only visual elements such as logos and colors but also the core

values that universities aim to convey to potential students. This forms a solid foundation for building strong brand awareness among prospective students.

The importance of branding lies in its capacity to differentiate one university from another in a highly competitive market. According to Perera et al., (2022), strong brand equity is a primary key in the branding activities of universities. Brand equity reflects the credibility and service capabilities that a university can offer to prospective students. Brand equity can assist universities in setting themselves apart from their competitors. In the increasingly globalized landscape of higher education, having a robust brand identity is one way to remain competitive and stand out among various other universities (Sagynbekova et al., 2021a). Why has brand equity become so critical in today's world of higher education? The answer lies in the fact that students are valuable assets for every university. Students are not just customers but also representations of the success and quality of the university. With strong brand equity, universities can attract more high-quality prospective students. It also helps in recruiting competent and experienced academic staff, which, in turn, enhances the quality of education offered by the university. In the service sector, such as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), brand credibility offers several advantages, including nurturing strong relationship equity (Perera et al., 2022) This, in turn, builds stronger relationships between customers and the brand (Farhat et al., 2020). Brand credibility encompasses customers' perceptions of the brand's ability, motivation, and willingness to provide accurate and trustworthy information, as well as its commitment to fulfilling its promises (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

At present, there exists a competitive landscape between Public Universities (PTN) and Private Universities (PTS), as well as among PTS themselves (Mahdi et al., 2019; Yusuf, 2022), especially concerning the effort to attract new student enrollments. Despite the fact that Indonesian society still tends to favor PTN, PTS need to devise effective strategies to garner public attention and persuade them to consider PTS as a viable alternative. PTS face intricate challenges in realizing their objectives and maintaining sustainable competitive advantages. Furthermore, the difficulty is compounded by rapid changes occurring in the internal and external environments. Additionally, PTS must operate with limited resources compared to PTN (Dwiyanti & Adisanjaya, 2022).

Based on global research on social media, it has been observed that there is a significant increase in social media usage among the younger generation aged 18 to 24 years (Sagynbekova et al., 2021b). According Ferreira et al. (2022), the internet and social networks have become integral parts of daily life for all individuals involved in the education process. Consequently, marketing activities on social media are gaining increasing importance for universities in order to establish connections with prospective students (Lacka & Wong, 2021). Higher education institutions are progressively leveraging social media to disseminate information, communicate, and collaborate with students (Masele & Rwehikiza, 2021). The adoption of social media as a marketing channel has witnessed substantial growth in recent years, driven by its capacity to reach millions of customers with content related to the university's brand and engage them in meaningful dialogues (Lacka & Wong, 2021). One of the primary reasons for the inclusion of social media in higher education marketing strategies is its capability to safeguard higher education institutions in a competitive environment and establish immediate connections with target audiences (Casidy & Wymer, 2015; Sugianto & Farida, 2018). Higher education institutions employ social media to offer prospective students a better understanding of factors such as reputation, educational services, course relevance, and faculty profiles (Lee et al., 2020; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022; Masele & Rwehikiza, 2021).

These elements significantly influence prospective students and other users of social media when they make decisions about selecting a college (Yang et al., 2020). Despite the perceived risks associated with the use of social media in higher education marketing, HEIs acknowledge the advantages of social media marketing and endeavor to maintain a positive image as trusted institutions (Wong et al., 2018).

In order to communicate brand-related information to their target customers, social media utilizes two distinct forms of information dissemination: user-generated content (UGC) and firm-generated content (FGC) (Al-Abdallah & Jumaa, 2022; Carvalho et al., 2020). UGC refers to media content that is created or produced by the general public, primarily distributed on the internet, while FGC comprises content generated by marketers on the official brand pages across social media platforms. Brand-related UGC serves as a catalyst for motivating prospective students to cultivate positive sentiments towards the brand. Often, students actively seek information and guidance from others on social media to shape their favorable attitudes towards the brand, thereby augmenting brand equity. Conversely, FGC enables consumers to evaluate higher education institutions in comparison to their competitors, thereby contributing to the establishment of brand equity (Sadek, 2021).

While a significant number of universities acknowledge using social media tools and platforms as part of their regular professional activities, the evidence suggests that only a few are genuinely harnessing the potential of social media to distinguish themselves from other universities (Perera et al., 2022). Furthermore, the majority of existing research on the use of social media by academics originates from developed countries, with limited research from developing nations (Quoc Nghi Nguyena\*, 2020). The primary objective of this study is to gain an understanding of how social media marketing conducted by private universities (PTS) and brand credibility can shape and enhance brand equity for PTS. This research offers a comprehensive insight into the factors that drive brand equity for PTS. These findings are valuable resources for crafting branding and marketing strategies for PTS through social media campaigns.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Brand Equity of Higher Education**

Amidst the current trends of globalization and escalating competition, the realm of branding and brand equity has garnered significant attention. The fundamental objective of all branding strategies is to nurture a robust brand equity. As per Aaker (1991), brand equity mirrors the value that consumers associate with a brand; hence, the potency of a brand lies in what consumers have absorbed, perceived, heard, and reacted to regarding the brand over time. Proficient brand management fortifies brand equity. It signifies the advantageous distinction that emerges when consumers identify the brand name and its impact on their responses to the product or service (Kotler, 2012). Marketers elevate brand value by delivering exceptional quality, bestowing social prestige upon users, instilling consumer trust, and fostering personal connection with the brand.

In the context of higher education, there has been a noticeable shift towards a marketing-oriented approach. Universities are increasingly recognizing the importance of developing a strong university brand and often adopt a customer-centric approach towards their students (Mourad et al., 2020; Sagynbekova et al., 2021b; Tammubua, 2022). A strong, advantageous, and distinctive affiliation with a university's brand may not fully materialize until an individual

completes their academic journey, which typically represents a medium to long-term commitment and becomes an integral part of their identity (Vukasović, 2022). Given the significant risks involved in this process, brand equity can play a crucial role in risk mitigation (Mourad et al., 2020).

Prospective students, in their decision-making process, often seek information from existing students about the university. Therefore, brand equity can be a differentiating and crucial factor in shaping student choices (Guilbault, 2018). Prospective students, in their decision-making process, often seek information from existing students about the university. Therefore, brand equity can be a differentiating and crucial factor in shaping student choices (Khanna et al., 2019; Carvalho et al., 2020; Vukasović, 2022)

## **2.2. User-Generated Content, Brand Credibility and Brand Equity**

Social media provides users with the ability to generate and exchange brand-related content on digital platforms (Ferreira et al., 2022). In this context, brand evaluation doesn't solely arise from interactions between customers and the company but also among customers themselves (Al-Abdallah & Jumaa, 2022). Individuals tend to place trust in opinions about a brand shared by their peers, family members, or influential figures, deeming such opinions credible and reliable (Dubey et al., 2023). Consequently, user-generated content (UGC) can have varying impacts on users' perceptions of a brand (Jiao et al., 2018). Brand-related UGC, encompassing activities like product/service reviews, comments on facilities, and discussions concerning individuals associated with the brand, often involves actions such as 'likes,' 'comments,' 'shares,' and 'voting.' The core reason individuals have faith in UGC is the absence of a commercial agenda behind it (Ho et al., 2020). Therefore, when users engage extensively with positive brand-related UGC, it is likely to positively influence their brand evaluations (Jiao et al., 2018).

Hence, the information disseminated by users on social media regarding universities can impact the prospective students' perceptions of the university's brand. When prospective students come across user-generated content associated with the university that they deem helpful, valuable, or persuasive, and they recognize that the content is shared by individuals they are familiar with, they are more inclined to follow those reviews and recommendations (Mourad et al., 2020). The higher the credibility attributed to the information shared by current students and parents, the greater the social media users' perception of the university's brand credibility. This can lead to the establishment of brand value in their minds and, consequently, result in more positive evaluations of the university's brand equity. Thus, the hypothesis being posited is as follows:

H1: User-Generated Content has a positive impact on Brand Equity

H2: Brand Credibility mediates the impact of User-Generated Content on Brand Equity

## **2.3. Firm-Generated Content, Brand Credibility and Brand Equity**

Content shared on official brand pages serves as a signal of brand expertise, influencing the future customers' perceptions of the brand (Perera et al., 2022). Prospective customers gain a better understanding of the brand's expertise and performance by reviewing the number of followers on the official brand page and interactions within its posts (Mourad et al., 2020). Social media users typically rely on content published by the brand, assuming that the brand possesses superior knowledge about its products or services compared to others (Sadek, 2021). The meaningful brand image conveyed through Firm-Generated Content (FGC) on social

media provides insights into the brand's capabilities and expertise in delivering superior performance compared to its competitors (Wang et al., 2017).

In the context of higher education, the information disseminated by universities on social media platforms can significantly influence students' perceptions (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Information such as career advancement opportunities, collaborations with top industry partners, institutional rankings, success stories in research and education, the availability of university scholarships, job placement prospects, state-of-the-art facilities, and student clubs and associations can provide valuable cues for students to assess the university's credibility (Bhattacharya & Faisal, 2020). Consequently, prospective students can form perceptions of the university's brand credibility and, consequently, develop a strong perception of the university's brand equity. Therefore, the hypothesis being proposed is as follows:

H3: Firm-Generated Content has a positive impact on Brand Equity

H4: Brand Credibility mediates the impact of User-Generated Content on Brand Equity

#### 2.4. Brand Credibility and Brand Equity

In the context of higher education, brand credibility plays a crucial role in shaping brand equity (Perera et al., 2022). When a university is regarded as credible by prospective students, parents, and the general public, it can result in a positive perception of the quality of education offered by the university. This, in turn, can mitigate information-gathering costs and perceived risks for prospective students considering enrollment at the university (Mukrimaa et al., 2016). Additionally, a university brand's credibility can influence prospective students' perceptions of various attributes, such as educational quality, facilities, reputation, and more. The higher a college's brand credibility, the greater the perceived value prospective students associate with their educational experience at that institution (Vukasović, 2022). In the event that a university loses its credibility, even robust marketing efforts or expensive promotional campaigns may prove ineffective in its recovery. The credibility of a university brand serves as a solid foundation for building a reputation and attracting prospective students (Khanna et al., 2019). ). Brand credibility exerts a significant impact on brand equity in the Higher Education sector (Perera et al., 2022). In this context, it can be argued that the credibility of the university brand underpins the university's brand equity and is a pivotal factor in the competition within the higher education arena (Ho et al., 2020). Therefore, the proposed hypothesis is as follows:

H5: Brand Credibility has a positive impact on Brand Equity

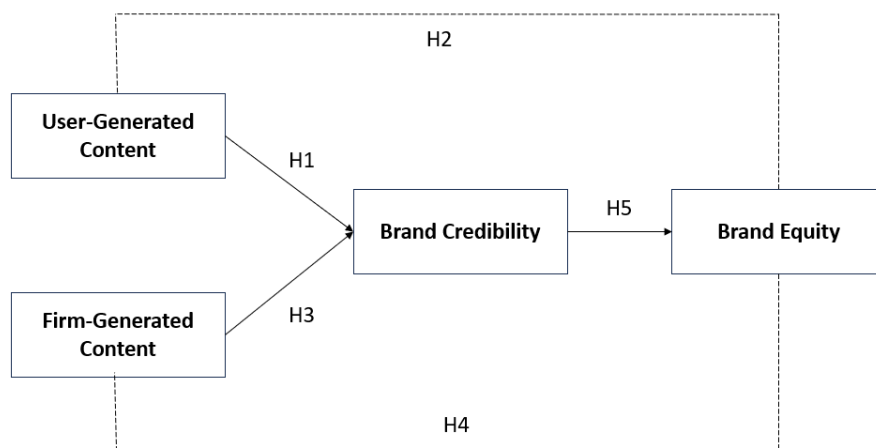


Figure 1. A proposed conceptual model

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The aim of this study is to examine and analyze the impact of User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content on brand equity, with brand credibility as the mediating factor. This research follows a quantitative approach and adopts a cross-sectional study design. The study population comprises students enrolled in private universities located in Tangerang, specifically Prasetya Mulya, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, and Universitas Bina Nusantara. These universities were chosen due to their substantial size, each having a student population exceeding five thousand. These institutions allocate considerable resources to gain a competitive edge, resulting in heightened competition. The sampling method employed is non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling. The unit of analysis is the individual, with a total sample size of 300 respondents. Data collection primarily involves the use of a questionnaire employing a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. This questionnaire is distributed online via Google Forms. The measurement instrument indicators have been adapted and customized to suit the higher education context, drawing from research developed by (Perera et al., 2022).

Descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis were employed to create a data profile. The observed variables for this construct were identified using data analysis methods with the Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) technique, utilizing Smart PLS 4 software as depicted in Figure 1.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Profile Respondent

**Table 1. Demographics**

	Prasetya Mulya n=65	Universitas Pelita Harapan n=90	Universitas Multimedia Nusantara n=75	Universitas Bina Nusantara n=70
<b>Gender</b>				
<b>Female</b>	40	60	55	50
<b>Male</b>	25	30	20	20
<b>College Status</b>				
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>	23	40	35	35
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Year</b>	14	15	14	13
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year</b>	18	28	21	17
<b>4<sup>th</sup> Year</b>	10	7	5	5

#### 4.2. Reliability and validity of the measurement model

**Table 2. Factor Loading and Construct Reliability**

Variabel	Indikator	Factor Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho a)	Composite Reliability (rho c)	AVE
UGC1	I follow the university’s social networking sites to learn more	0,783	0,818	0,824	0,879	0,645

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	about the upcoming activities of the university.					
UGC2	Within these social networking sites, the content shared by other users about my university on meets my expectation.	0,831				
UGC3	Within these social networking sites, the content shared by other users about my university is very attractive.	0,809				
UGC4	Within these social networking sites, the content shared by other users about my university is better than other universities.	0,789				
FGC1	I follow the information posted by this university on their official social networking sites to get the updated information about the university.	0,787	0,769	0,774	0,866	0,684
FGC2	I follow up by communicating with the university’s official social networking sites to get more information about the university.	0,839				
FGC3	I will follow the information on the university’s official social networking sites if the university-related information is interesting.	0,853				
BC1	This university does exactly what they promise.	0,792	0,868	0,872	0,910	0,718
BC2	I can count on the brand of this university.	0,893				
BC3	The quality promoted by this university is trustworthy.	0,872				
BC4	This university reminds me of a graduate who is equipped with enough skills and knowledge and knows what they are doing.	0,829				
BE1	I can expect an outstanding teaching quality from this university.	0,779	0,941	0,944	0,949	0,653
BE2	During the study period, I found that the quality of this university was less prone to errors.	0,863				
BE3	I feel proud of the decision to enrol in this university.	0,877				
BE4	This university will be well appreciated by my friends.	0,825				
BE5	Based on information on social networks, this university is suitable for my personality.	0,760				
BE6	This university degree is valuable.	0,861				

BE7	Considering the level of tuition that I pay for this university; I believe I will receive more than that tuition that I spend.	0,749				
BE8	For students' interests, the university seems very attentive.	0,753				
BE9	After experiencing this university, I was very pleased with my growth and knowledge	0,833				
BE10	I have a positive feeling for this university.	0,768				

Notes: UGC = User Generated Content; FGC = Firm Generated Content; BC = Brand Credibility; BE = Brand Equity.

In the measurement model evaluation is carried out the reliability and validity test. Firstly, construct reliability was assessed through Cronbach's and composite reliability. Cronbach's alpha criterion to be called a valid data is the value has to be above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2020). The values of the Cronbah alpha and composite reliability that displayed in table 2, are all above 0.7, it can be concluded that all variables are considered to be reliable to be used for further method. Secondly, Convergent validity criteria consist of the factor loading and the AVE. In order to pass as a valid indicator and variables, the data need to pass certain criteria from convergent validity tests in which the factor loading values has to be more than 0.7 and the AVE has to be exceeded 0.5 (Hair et al., 2020). The table 2, shows every indicator value which already passes the factor loading criteria.

**Tabel 3. Heterotrait -Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)**

	BC	BE	FGC	UGC
BC				
BE	0,887 CI (0,878-0,989)			
FGC	0,252 CI (0,070 – 0,283)	0,238 CI (0,218-0,374)		
UGC	0,192 CI (0,130-0,248)	0,202 CI (0,144-0,272)	0,879 CI (0,763-0,981)	

Furthermore, the authors examined the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations to assess whether the constructs were measured discriminately (i.e. perfectly reliable with no error), and the HTMT values ranged between 0.070 and 0.887, scoring below the conservative threshold value of 0.9, which confirms empirically distinct constructs (Henseler et al., 2015).

#### 4.2. Hypothesis model and main effects

**Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results**

Hypothesis	Std. Coefficient	P values	Confidence Interval (CI)		Result
			5.0% Lower	95.0% Upper	
Brand Credibility → Brand Equity	0,984	0,000	0,978	0,989	Supported



Firm-Generated Brand Credibility	Content →	0,176	0,003	0,071	0,283	Supported
Firm-Generated Brand Equity	Content →	0,023	0,030	0,011	0,051	Supported
User-Generated Brand Credibility	Content →	0,046	0,032	0,036	0,141	Supported
User-Generated Brand Equity	Content →	0,032	0,009	0,012	0,056	Supported

Summary statistics and correlation of observed variables are given in Table 4. The findings of the interrelationships of the study variables are significant at P value < 0.05. Specifically, User-Generated Content positively relates to Brand Credibility and Firm-Generated Content positively relates with Brand Credibility. Hence, the empirical data supported H1 and H3. Furthermore, User-Generated Content positively relates to Brand Equity and Firm-Generated Content positively relates to brand equity. Hence, the empirical data supported H2 and H4. Brand Credibility positively relates to Brand Equity hence the empirical data H5 is supported.

**Table 5. Specific Indirect Effects**

Hypothesis	Std. Coefficient	P values	Confidence Interval (CI)		Result
			5.0% Lower	95.0% Upper	
Firm-Generated Content → Brand Credibility → Brand Equity	0,173	0,000	0,070	0,280	Supported
User-Generated Content → Brand Credibility → Brand Equity	0,045	0,003	0,030	0,283	Supported

The findings regarding the mediation hypothesis have been derived from a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis. The results concerning the indirect effects, using the bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, have been presented in Table 5. The mediation hypotheses find support. As detailed in Table 3, Brand Equity acts as a partial mediator between User-Generated Content and Brand Equity, as well as between Firm-Generated Content and Brand Equity. Consequently, H5 is substantiated.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on the research results, it can be elucidated that User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content exert a positive influence on brand credibility within the context of higher education. These findings are consistent with studies conducted by Sagynbekova et al. (2021b), Ruangkanjanases et al. (2022). underscoring the role of social media in shaping brand credibility. User-Generated Content emerges as the most potent variable in enhancing brand credibility. This suggests that both students and prospective students are more swayed by the opinions, feedback, and comments generated by other users than by advertisements, videos, or images originating from the university itself. These findings align with the research conducted by Le et al. (2019); Wong et al. (2018), which propose that individuals are more inclined to be influenced by the perceptions of fellow users, perceived as more trustworthy, than by brand advertisements when making their choice of a university.

In the age of social media, characterized by the proliferation of easily accessible information, active consumers seek high levels of satisfaction. Consequently, students and prospective students heavily depend on reviews from peers and other users before making decisions. For them, customer feedback holds greater value as an information source compared to information provided by companies.

This research identifies the crucial role of the mediating variable, brand credibility. The results indicate that the influence of User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content on brand equity, mediated by brand credibility, is significant. User-Generated Content and Firm-Generated Content do not directly build brand equity but are conveyed through brand credibility. Content shared by users allows prospective customers to gain knowledge about how the university has the ability to deliver on the brand promise. Similarly, content updated by the university through social media in the form of advertisements, comments, or responses to individual comments helps prospective customers recognize whether the university is credible or not. As a result, this strengthens their perception of the university's brand equity. By confirming the mediating role of brand credibility, this study expands on the arguments made by (Dwivedi et al., 2021) Dwivedi, Nayeem, and Murshed (2018), who reported that building brand credibility is an effective way to attract customers, making it easier for consumers to justify paying a higher price for the value of brand equity. The research findings reveal that brand credibility has a positive influence on brand equity in universities. This aligns with research conducted by Vukasović (2022); Perera et al. (2022).

## **6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

This study offers valuable guidance for marketers within higher education institutions to identify the most impactful content on social media and implement branding strategies capable of capturing the attention of prospective students and parents, who also play a significant role in the decision-making process. Furthermore, these findings underscore the pivotal role of brand equity within the higher education sector.

In the realm of higher education marketing, it is imperative to establish and maintain online platforms where students can actively contribute as User-Generated Content. Prospective students and parents actively engage with various stakeholders within the higher education sector on social media platforms. They seek out posts and insights from current students, solicit advice from alumni and education experts, and actively participate in discussions. Consequently, User-Generated Content assumes a critical role in encouraging prospective students to critically evaluate information pertaining to the university, ultimately contributing to a positive perception of the university and enhancing its brand equity. In essence, an upsurge in User-Generated Content translates to higher levels of satisfaction, thereby improving the overall positive perception of the university brand among students.

Given the paramount significance of brand credibility in augmenting brand equity, it is imperative for higher education marketing efforts to ensure absolute clarity in conveying the university's brand message, with the primary aim of capturing the attention of prospective students. Consistency in communication with students through both Firm-Generated Content and User-Generated Content is of utmost importance, as it plays a pivotal role in depicting the credibility of the educational services provided by the university. In line with the findings of

Mourad et al. (2020), it is recommended that universities concentrate their efforts on developing and upholding the determinants of brand equity, rather than merely expanding promotional campaigns. This focused approach will aid universities in effectively positioning their services within the market and influencing prospective students' intentions to enroll (Perera et al., 2022).

## **7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES**

This research was conducted only at four private universities in Tangerang. Future research would benefit from including and comparing multiple private and public universities, to cross-validate the findings. It would be intriguing to discover and identify how public universities develop branding strategies using social media.

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