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Knowledge-driven reputation management in higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

Reputation management is a key strategic priority for higher education institutions (HEIs) in a highly competitive global academic landscape. This study explores the dimensions of HEI reputation, focusing on brand identity, stakeholder perceptions, research impact, internationalization, rankings, and communication strategy. Using a qualitative research design, the study examines data from leading HEIs. Thematic and sentiment analyses offer insights into the complex relationships between HEI performance and stakeholder expectations. The results reveal that HEI reputation is influenced not only by ranking metrics but also by stakeholder engagement, academic excellence, and strategic communication. The study contributes to knowledge by linking theoretical reputation management models with practical institutional strategies, offering valuable recommendations for education leaders and policymakers.

Introduction

Internationalization, labor market changes, and the need for creative teaching strategies are key issues facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in a constantly shifting academic and economic environment. While competing for faculty, students, campus resources, and knowledge creation, HEIs must also overcome challenges to their financial sustainability due to budgetary constraints and declining government funding (Khan et al., 2020; Marginson, 2022; Miotto et al., 2019). These financial pressures are exacerbated by increasingly demanding stakeholder expectations and growing management complexity due to globalization and new technologies. In sum, HEIs have a major impact on society and the economy by transferring knowledge and fostering entrepreneurship. However, they must contend with issues such as declining financing, heightened competition, and growing calls for responsibility and openness (Miotto et al., 2019).

HEI reputation is not only influenced by linkages with stakeholders, such as governments, civil society, and the commercial sector, but is also determined by rankings. Rankings have the power to upend traditional roles and hierarchies, as well as inspiring fresh approaches to performance and driving institutional reforms. However, the repercussions of

an HEI's reputation and the way it is regarded might differ depending on the audience the HEI serves (Collins & Park, 2015; Sallam, 2025). Studies have shown that factors including the learning environment, job projections, student experiences, curricula, teaching quality, tuition fees, and HEI reputation influence strategies and management decisions in the higher education system (Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2023; Kochetkov, 2024). In the current competitive environment, public HEIs are adopting new public management practices and governance strategies, such as performance- and productivity-based entrepreneurial management. They must adapt to this environment by involving third-party institutions to sustain their reputation and relevance (Gkrimpizi et al., 2023; Romiani et al., 2024).

Despite the increasing global emphasis on university reputation as an antecedent of institutional success, research in this area has largely focused on isolated aspects, such as branding (O'Sullivan et al., 2024) and stakeholder perceptions (Amado-Mateus et al., 2024), without fully capturing its multifaceted nature (Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025). Analysis has often considered these dimensions independently and has lacked a comprehensive framework. For instance, brand identity has been associated with institutional visibility (Dwitasari et al., 2025). Meanwhile, community engagement has been

found to have a greater influence on stakeholder perceptions than trust-building (Sheila et al., 2021). In addition, although research output is often considered a metric of academic quality, its role in shaping HEI reputation remains unclear (Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2023). Similarly, internationalization context relies on traditional and emerging aspects of mobility, without capturing how HEIs can improve their place in the standings (Vakulenko et al., 2025). Another important factor is an HEI's position in global rankings. Despite their well-acknowledged impact on academic reputation, global rankings have been insufficiently examined in terms of sustained institutional development (Kayyali, 2023; Kochetkov, 2024). Likewise, digital communication strategies also shape HEIs' advancement, acting as a key driver of academic reputation. Finally, although recent studies have acknowledged vital elements such as posting frequency and interactivity (Fatanti et al., 2025; Santos et al., 2021), insights into how HEIs implement these communication practices are limited.

The limitations of the existing literature further illustrate the methodological gap. Much of the existing literature focuses on quantitative measures of reputation (e.g., Qazi et al., 2022; Raja, 2023), often neglecting the qualitative factors that shape stakeholder trust, institutional credibility, and long-term academic sustainability. The present study addresses this limitation by adopting a multidimensional approach to reputation management in HEIs to examine these core dimensions using a qualitative design. Given the complexity and interdependence of these dimensions, this approach is suitable. The reason is that it gives a contextualized understanding of HEIs' internal and external mechanisms, as well as their interconnections. Hence, the subtle meanings and hidden patterns that often remain uncovered in quantitative research are effectively revealed through this method.

In sum, this paper aims to identify the key resources and capabilities that build academic reputation. It explores how factors influencing HEI brand identity, internal and external stakeholder perceptions, research impact, international collaborations, and global rankings shape institutional visibility and credibility. It also investigates how strategic communication enhances stakeholder engagement. This research examines all six dimensions by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1. What key factors define and strengthen the brand, identity, and image of HEIs?

RQ2. How do stakeholders perceive HEI reputation?

RQ3. What role does research play in shaping HEI reputation?

RQ4. How does internationalization contribute to HEI reputation globally?

RQ5. How do global rankings contribute to the competitiveness and strategic positioning of HEIs in an increasingly globalized education market?

RQ6. How could communication strategy be leveraged to engage stakeholders effectively and enhance institutional reputation?

This study develops the literature by offering a comprehensive multidimensional perspective on HEI reputation management that goes beyond traditional academic indicators such as research metrics or rankings. In addition, by integrating brand identity, stakeholder perceptions, internationalization, and communication strategy into a unified framework, this research enriches the knowledge of how universities can reinforce their institutional standing. Specifically, knowledge-driven insights provided by thematic and sentiment analyses lead to a better understanding of how reputation is shaped not only by measurable institutional performance but also by stakeholder trust and engagement. This alignment between internal actions and external perceptions is consistent with notions from stakeholder theory, which explains that organizations must consider the diverse interests and influence of all actors involved in strategic positioning (Freeman, 1984).

The practical value of this paper resides in its potential to support HEIs' management and communication teams, as well as policymakers,

in designing and implementing more effective strategies for building academic reputation. HEIs can improve their strategic planning and collaborative engagement by considering the interplay between institutional image, stakeholder perceptions, and external reputation drivers such as internationalization and rankings. As reputation becomes increasingly important for international visibility, student attraction, and resource mobilization, this integrated perspective can help the higher education sector develop adaptive decision-making processes. Moreover, it offers useful guidance for developing policies and regulatory frameworks that protect institutional credibility.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a literature review that outlines the theoretical foundation and existing research on the six chosen dimensions influencing HEI reputation, namely: brand, identity, and image; stakeholder perceptions; research; rankings; internationalization; and communication strategy. Section 3 explains the methodology, highlighting the use of qualitative thematic and sentiment analyses for data visualization and interpretation. Section 4 presents the findings, addressing the research questions and highlighting key insights from the data. Then, Section 5 presents the discussion. Sections 6 and 7 detail the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the study, offering recommendations for HEI administrators. Finally, Sections 8 and 9 cover the conclusions, as well as the study's limitations and future research directions.

Literature review

Brand, identity, and image

The brand of an HEI is increasingly understood as a mixture of internal values (identity) and external perceptions (image) that cultivate long-term institutional credibility. This internal–external duality is consistent with the view of corporate identity as a strategic interface between institutional purpose and individuality oriented toward diverse audiences (Balmer, 2001). Whereas identity is formed within an organization, image and reputation are sometimes thought of as external perceptions (Steiner et al., 2013). However, discerning between internal and external views in today's globalized society may be difficult. Academic self-presentations and symbolic artifacts are examples of how HEIs enhance their reputation and appeal, thus communicating their brand essence (Kaushal et al., 2021).

To stand out in competitive environments, HEIs strategically use branding to differentiate themselves in terms of academic excellence, innovation, and international visibility (Khoshtaria et al., 2020). Brand personality drivers such as prestige, sincerity, appeal, and cosmopolitanism motivate stakeholder engagement and loyalty (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). However, HEI branding is not merely about visibility. Aligning internal values with diverse stakeholder expectations also requires branding strategies that promote both recognition and trust (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022; Kaushal et al., 2021). This study builds on these perspectives by exploring how HEIs construct and reinforce their brand identity through multiple practices. Instead of isolating the brand as a marketing outcome, this research seeks to understand how brand affects institutional reputation in higher education in both local and international contexts.

Stakeholder perceptions

In a university setting, reputation refers to stakeholder perceptions of interactions and communication. HEI reputation is increasingly considered an emerging concept that is derived from stakeholder evaluations and validated through legitimization procedures (Lafuente-Ruiz-De-Sabando et al., 2018). Internal and external stakeholders increasingly demand higher levels of research, education, information transfer, employment, and community outreach, reflecting institutional performance and cognitive judgments, while also shaping enrollment decisions (Amoozegar et al., 2025; García-Hurtado et al.,

2024). According to García-Rodríguez and Gutiérrez-Taño (2021), although students and alumni have been the primary focus of such evaluations, other key stakeholders, such families, social entities, and society, have often been overlooked in relation to loyalty to HEIs. A responsible HEI ensures high quality indiscriminately for all stakeholders. Furthermore, it addresses environmental concerns and serves the community by dedicating resources to socially responsible causes (de Moraes Abrahão et al., 2024).

Understanding stakeholder perceptions enables exploration of how diverse stakeholders interact with HEIs' academic offerings and assign value to both institutional behavior and social responsibility. Rather than being a fixed attribute, reputation is relational and builds continuously on social interaction (Bromley, 1993). In contrast to models based on image, this study emphasizes the idea that reputation is shaped by diverse concepts such as academic quality, inclusion, employability, and community engagement. In sum, the present research investigates the complex nature of stakeholder perceptions in relation to institutional credibility.

Research

The caliber and output of research production greatly influences HEI reputation. International organizations, national governments, institutions, and student organizations all place great emphasis on the global aspect of higher education systems (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2013). How best to define and measure research excellence remains a topic of debate. Although research excellence often determines academic rankings and influences public perception, relying too heavily on mainstream metrics of academic performance leads to discrepancies between the measurable value of the research conducted within HEIs and the worth of such research to society (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016). As a result, universities may struggle to translate measurable performance into long-term reputational value and social legitimacy.

By combining teaching, research, and community involvement, universities strengthen their academic culture. For example, including students in research, promoting cross-faculty collaboration, and providing access to scientific events are actions that improve HEIs' prestige (Eichberg & Charles, 2024). Additionally, the way in which research contributions are interpreted and valued within the higher education sector relies on internal academic conditions such as professional recognition and staff engagement (Rashid & Mustafa, 2021). Institutional reputation is also shaped by how well universities prepare students for socially engaged and entrepreneurial leadership (Diepolder et al., 2025). However, pragmatic mindsets and a lack of teacher support are the main reasons why many students are uninterested in scientific study (Lamanauskas & Augienė, 2015). Accordingly, the way stakeholders perceive an HEI's research efforts is essential. Through the lens of educational quality, this study explores the formative role of research culture in shaping HEI reputation.

Internationalization

Internationalization is essential to advance higher education systems in the context of global changes (Zhang & Cao, 2024). In recent decades, HEIs have expanded internationally through exchange programs, partnerships, and diverse recruitment strategies to allow them to compete academically and adapt culturally (Cattaneoet al., 2015; Knight & de Wit, 1997). In sum, internationalization has an impact on all aspects of the higher education system, reflecting their interconnectedness (Knight, 2022).

In addition to its administrative aspects, internationalization in higher education also has an emotional and symbolic side. It is often described as a form of soft power, used by HEIs to promote cultural exchange and diplomatic relations. In addition to developing infrastructure, international efforts have been made to create an inclusive environment for students (Gauttam et al., 2024). Stukalova et al. (2015)

highlighted inconsistencies between institutional motivations and justifications for internationalization. However, de Wit and Jones (2018) and Knight (2022) emphasized the importance of distinguishing structural drivers from institutional commitments to education values. Hence, this study investigates the role of internationalization as both a strategic process and a symbolic commitment, acknowledging its potential to reinforce HEI reputation.

Rankings

HEIs are under pressure to reorganize and develop new identities in response to escalating global competition. In this context, HEI rankings, which are based on HEIs' level of research, education, social interactions, and numbers of future students, are becoming increasingly important. The position of an HEI in a ranking reflects its academic excellence, with a higher ranking increasing the market value of a degree from that HEI and facilitating post-graduate job searching (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2013; Steiner et al., 2013). Key ranking lists include the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, which use academic prestige, citation impact, employer perception, and international visibility as performance indicators (Miotto et al., 2019; Moed, 2017). However, such rankings may not offer an accurate reflection of educational quality, particularly in diverse national contexts (Vernon et al., 2018), where some of these indicators raise concerns about objectivity (Badiuzzaman, 2025).

Despite the widespread use of rankings, the pursuit of a high ranking often places financial strain on HEIs, especially in developing nations (Marginson, 2016). Discrepancies between global aspirations and regional needs often divert resources away from local priorities (Jenny et al., 2020; Yat Wai Lo & Yung-Chi Hou, 2020). Drawing on these insights, this study examines how universities interpret and experience ranking pressures in relation to their identity, stakeholder expectations, and available infrastructure. This approach gives an in-depth understanding by also considering internal realities rather than focusing exclusively on externally imposed standards.

Communication strategy

Communication strategy in HEIs is being transformed by the rise of social media, digital platforms, and Web 2.0 tools. Social media has reshaped HEIs' role as key knowledge providers. These instruments have been embraced to bridge the gap between digital immigrants (teachers) and digital natives (students) in this new landscape (Kaixiang et al., 2024; Lafuente-Ruiz-De-Sabando et al., 2018). Furthermore, HEIs rely on digital communication to make their research visible and build their institutional brand. Social customer relationship management (CRM) offers opportunities to personalize outreach and align institutional messages with stakeholder expectations. Meanwhile, web-based strategies such as blogs and newsfeeds enable real-time interactions (Elshaer et al., 2024; Sörensen et al., 2023).

Particularly for public institutions, communication campaigns can influence perceptions within society (Gültekin & Gültekin, 2012). Digital platforms enhance HEI reputation by increasing responsiveness and accessibility (Wang et al., 2023). However, greater stakeholder engagement can be achieved when digital solutions are balanced with traditional in-person methods (Bharti et al., 2023). Therefore, this study examines how HEIs use communication as more than just a support function, embracing its role as a core strategic process.

Methodology

Qualitative methods are indispensable for gaining deep insights and understanding complex phenomena. Whereas quantitative research relies on numerical data and statistical analysis to provide insights, qualitative research delves into human experience and perspectives,

capturing contextual influences and nuances that are often lost in numerical translation. Qualitative research is not only a methodological choice but also a commitment to exploring social phenomena in depth, enabling researchers to connect with the subjective experiences of participants (Lim, 2024). Respondents can describe how they perceive an experience by answering open-ended questions such as how they feel about a certain encounter. Hence, employing qualitative methods allows researchers to comprehend and categorize perceptual judgments (Barnham, 2015).

Data collection

A qualitative approach was adopted to study data from 15 higher education professionals in diverse leadership roles, as detailed in Table 1. Study participants were selected using purposive sampling. This approach ensured the selection of relevant respondent profiles based on experience and diversity. It thus achieved representativeness (Patton, 2015) across key institutional dimensions relevant to HEI reputation.

Two respondents were HEI rectors, three were HEI vice-rectors, and three were HEI deans. One respondent was an HEI research director, and six held other academic or administrative positions within HEIs. The time they had spent in their current roles ranged from less than one year to more than five years, with six participants having more than five years of experience. Respondents were affiliated with both public (11) and private (four) institutions, spanning small institutions (one respondent), medium-sized institutions (eight respondents), and large institutions (six respondents).

The study employed an open-ended questionnaire with 18 guiding questions (three for each of the six core dimensions of HEI reputation). Thanks to the depth of qualitative interviews, this framework encouraged participants to provide rich and reflective answers. The full list of questions appears in Table A1 (Appendix A). Table A1 maps each question to its corresponding reputational dimension, ensuring methodological transparency. The data collection process relied solely on open-ended questions. Therefore, no predefined measurement scales were used.

The sample size of 15 was considered sufficient. Dworkin (2012) explained that qualitative research can achieve meaningful and robust results with sample sizes ranging from five to 50 participants, particularly when focusing on specific populations with rich insights such as higher education professionals in leadership roles. Similarly, Ritchie and Lewis (2003) reported that a sample size such as the one used in the current study is adequate for exploring nuanced topics. Given the alignment between the guiding questions and the six research dimensions, the sample size was deemed adequate to capture a range of perspectives for each research question.

Research tool and data analysis

NVivo (version 15) was used for qualitative data analysis. It was chosen owing to its flexibility for hierarchical coding structures and

advanced visualization tools, which outperform those of other similar software such as ATLAS.ti (Paulus et al., 2015). NVivo facilitated the organization, coding, and sentiment and thematic analyses of the open-ended questionnaire response data, as well as the generation of visual outputs such as coding matrices (Zamawe, 2015). To ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, all authors collaboratively conducted and reviewed the coding process. This procedure ensured consistency and reduced subjectivity. Multiple rounds of code comparison and refinement were performed to identify and consolidate core patterns across responses. Discrepancies were resolved through mutual agreements, substantially reducing individual coder bias (Morgan, 2024). Data saturation was achieved by analyzing responses until no new themes emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The methodological process followed a clear sequence, which is illustrated in Fig. 1. Initially, the raw data were cleaned. Numerical values, special characters, excessive spaces, and grammatical inconsistencies were addressed to ensure uniformity and clarity. The clean data were then imported into NVivo.

Within NVivo, the data were coded using a systematic approach. Coding involved assigning segments of text to relevant categories. These categories, known as *nodes*, served as containers for related information. Nodes were hierarchically organized into *parent nodes* (representing broader themes) and *child nodes* (capturing more specific subthemes) that were aligned with the research questions (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Gibbs, 2018). This process facilitated thematic and sentiment analyses of responses. Sentiment analysis was performed using the autocoding feature in NVivo. Thematic analysis was conducted using manual data coding. The most frequently used words streamlined the identification and refinement of themes, offering a thorough interpretation of key insights. By capturing the emotional value of respondents' perceptions, sentiment analysis enriched the thematic coding. It thus offered a deeper understanding of respondents' perceptions of reputational attributes. Finally, NVivo's visualization tools (matrix coding queries) were employed to identify patterns and relationships within the data. These graphical outputs improved the interpretability of results, leading to relevant findings on the dimensions of HEI reputation.

Findings

Participants' responses led to the identification of six primary themes (categories) aligned with the research questions. These themes represented the core dimensions of HEI reputation, namely: brand, identity, and image; stakeholder perceptions; research; internationalization; rankings; and communication strategy. Each parent node was further divided into associated subthemes. These subthemes highlighted more detailed elements of each dimension. Fig. 2 shows the project map, which illustrates the hierarchy of themes and associated subthemes.

The project map not only depicts the themes but also forms a basis for interpreting the findings of the thematic and sentiment analyses. Table 2 complements the project map by providing a systematic overview of the main themes, their associated subthemes, and specific insights for different participant profiles.

Perceptions vary by managerial role and university size for the different themes, from global visibility and strategic partnerships to international demands and communication approaches. The following subsections examine each theme. They provide visual and textual evidence to build a detailed overview of the findings.

Thematic analysis

The collaborative thematic analysis used an inductive approach. Accordingly, subthemes were allowed to emerge from the data rather than being predefined. This process thus ensured consistency and led to a more complete perspective on HEI reputation.

Table 1
Respondents' profile.

Current position	No.	Time in current position	No.	Institution type	No.	Institution size	No.
Rector	2	<1 year	2	Public	11	Small	1
Vice-Rector	3	1 - 5 years	7	Private	4	Medium	8
Dean	3	>5 years	6			Large	6
Research Director	1						
Other	6						

Notes. Small (fewer than 5000 students); Medium (5000–15,000 students); Large (>15,000 students). Sample size: $n = 15$.
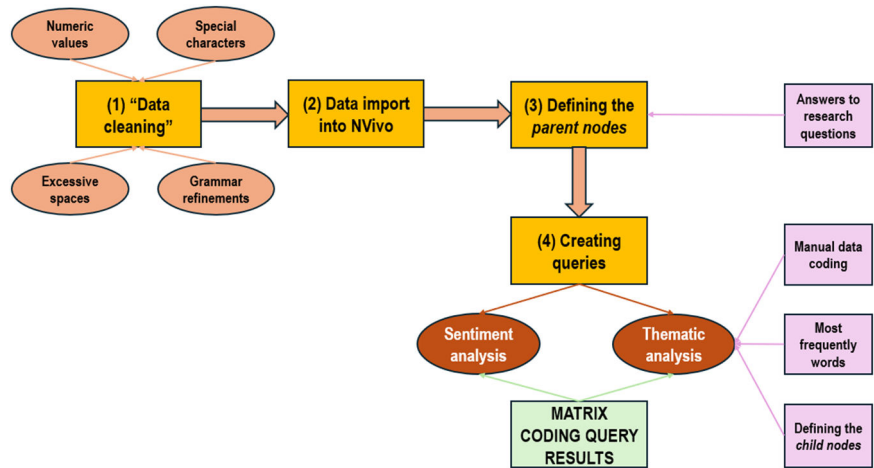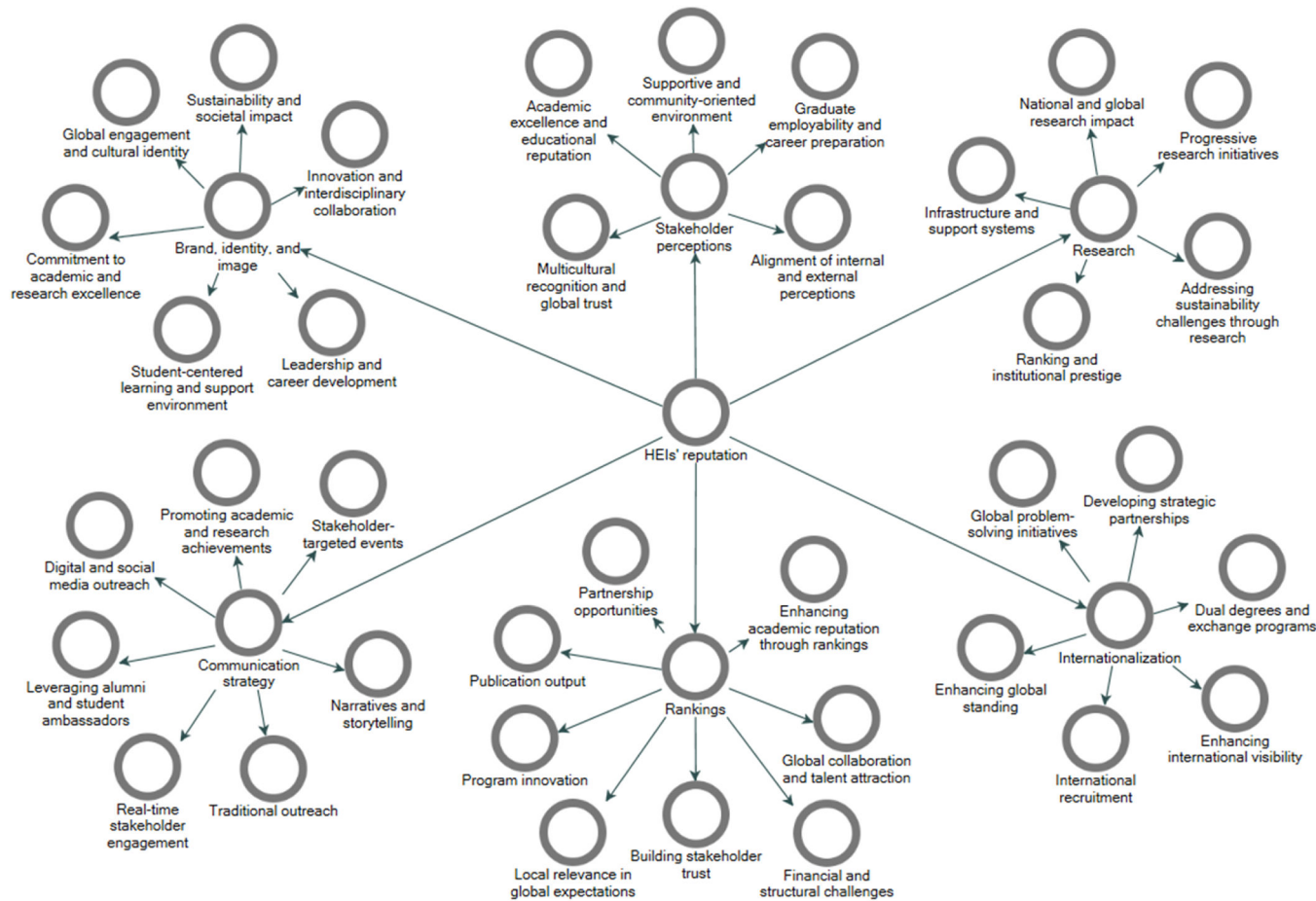
Fig. 1. Data analysis process.

Fig. 2. Project map of themes and their identified subthemes.

Brand, identity, and image

Within the first dimension, *research* was the most frequently mentioned term, followed by *academic, students, global, rankings, collaborative*, and *stakeholders*. These terms reflect the core factors shaping the brand, identity, and image of HEIs. They were directly reflected in the results of the thematic analysis, where six subthemes emerged (a full visual representation is available in Fig. B1, Appendix B). Table 3 shows that *commitment to academic and research excellence* was the most prominent subtheme, representing 24 % of the references

coded under the *brand, identity, and image* dimension (32 coding references). Respondents highlighted the importance of delivering high-quality educational experiences, stimulating intellectual advancements, and maintaining rigorous pedagogical standards as pillars of an HEI's identity. Such approaches were reported to underscore the key role of academic and research excellence in shaping HEI reputation:

Participant 3: "The quality of education is quite high, and the administration always strives to maintain this high standard by hiring top scholars." [1.a; 1.d]

Table 2

Overview of themes, subthemes, and specific insights based on respondents' profile.

Theme	Subthemes	Specific insights
Brand, identity, and image	Commitment to academic and research excellence Global engagement and cultural identity Sustainability and social impact Innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration Leadership and career development Student-centered learning and support environment	HEIs' management team (rectors and vice-rectors) emphasize high-quality education and global visibility, while deans prioritize adequate learning environments for students. Cultural identity and innovation are widely perceived as essential drivers of global competitiveness.
Stakeholder perceptions	Academic excellence and educational reputation Supportive and community-oriented environment Graduate employability and career preparation Alignment of internal and external perceptions Multicultural recognition and global trust	Public and large universities highlight strong alignment between internal and external stakeholders, encouraged by academic excellence and transparent communication. Conversely, private and medium-sized institutions recognize adaptability and responsiveness to complex international demands.
Research	National and global research impact Progressive research initiatives Addressing sustainability challenges through research Ranking and institutional prestige Infrastructure and support systems	Research outputs play a strategic role in strengthening the reputation of leading universities, supported by adequate infrastructure. However, smaller institutions emphasize sustainability issues and the need to improve their research capabilities.
Internationalization	Developing strategic partnerships Dual degrees and exchange programs Enhancing international visibility International recruitment Enhancing global standing Global problem-solving initiatives	Rectors and vice-rectors frame internationalization as a driver for establishing partnerships with foreign institutions to promote cultural exchange. In contrast, deans outline HEIs' global marketing efforts, supported by new educational programs.
Rankings	Enhancing academic reputation through rankings Global collaboration and talent attraction Financial and structural challenges Building stakeholder trust Local relevance in global expectations Program innovation Publication output Partnership opportunities	Rankings are a proof of institutional credibility. Large universities associate higher rankings with an active staff engaged in cutting-edge research, but they express concerns about increasing competition from other large HEIs. However, smaller academic institutions often feel constrained by limited resources.
Communication strategy	Digital and social media outreach	Large HEIs rely predominantly on structured digital outreach, increasing their visibility of academic accomplishments

Table 2 (*continued*)

Theme	Subthemes	Specific insights
	Promoting academic and research achievements Stakeholder-targeted events Narratives and storytelling Traditional outreach Real-time stakeholder engagement Leveraging alumni and student ambassadors	through social media. In contrast, medium-sized universities combine modern approaches with direct community linkages.

Table 3

Subthemes found for RC1 (brand, identity, and image).

No.	Subtheme	Number of coding references	Percentage (%)
1.a	Commitment to academic and research excellence	32	24
1.b	Global engagement and cultural identity	29	22
1.c	Sustainability and social impact	24	18
1.d	Innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration	18	14
1.e	Leadership and career development	16	12
1.f	Student-centered learning and support environment	13	10

Participant 9: "Our university is characterized by its commitment to academic excellence, interdisciplinary research, and fostering innovation. Situated in the culturally rich region of Brandenburg, it emphasizes a global perspective while maintaining strong local engagement." [1.a; 1.b; 1.d]

The second most prominent subtheme (22 %) was *encouraging global collaboration and promoting cultural inclusion*. This result indicates that these endeavors are a crucial part of the identity of HEIs, showing their commitment to creating a dynamic and diverse academic environment. This perspective emphasizes the essential role of promoting cross-cultural collaboration and meeting diverse social and professional demands to strengthen HEIs' global presence and institutional identity by cultivating dialogues across diverse regions. The following quotations offer examples taken from participants' responses:

Participant 6: "transparency and adaptability to socio-economic reality within Romania and the broader European Union; a proven track record of student success and graduate employability; a dedication to provide future-oriented and unique programs addressing emerging social and professional needs; integration of law, technology, and leadership; and engagement in impactful research and community projects." [1.a; 1.b; 1.c; 1.e; 1.f]

Participant 10: "By offering globally relevant programs and creating platforms for dialogue between Eastern and Western Europe, we reflect our values of innovation, inclusion, and social contribution. Additionally, our dedication to the university's vision and values, including efforts for integrating global educational practices, is supported by our involvement in organizations such as AUAP." [1.a; 1.b; 1.c; 1.d]

The third most prominent subtheme (18 %) was *sustainability initiatives and social engagement to complement academic efforts*. HEIs focus on preparing leaders to contribute responsibly to society, thus cultivating a culture of innovation, accountability, and social growth:

Participant 1: "The high investments in campus renovations and sustainability initiatives support our mission of training responsible

leaders. Furthermore, the integration of sustainability and ethics into our curriculum reflects our commitment to social impact." [1.c; 1.e]

Stakeholder perceptions

This dimension predominantly centered on the keyword *excellence*, indicating the importance of maintaining high standards in education and research. Other frequently mentioned terms were *education, environments, alignment, practical*, and *professional*, reflecting the demand for supportive learning spaces that promote career preparation and multicultural recognition. The answer to RQ2 was supported by five major subthemes (Fig. B2). The dominant category was *academic excellence and educational reputation*, which accounted for 39 coding references (31 %), as shown in Table 4. Rigorous academic programs and teaching practices that emphasize creativity, critical thinking, and research-driven learning were cited as particularly important by participants. HEIs were described as hubs of academic excellence and multicultural collaboration, prioritizing worldwide acknowledgment, teaching rigor, and impactful research outputs. The following are some quotations from participants' responses:

Participant 1: "Students, staff, and faculty members perceive our institution as a hub of academic excellence and multicultural collaboration. It is recognized as a place that prioritizes global exposure, high academic standards, and an inclusive, innovative environment for personal and professional growth." [2.a; 2.b; 2.c; 2e]

Participant 6: "Students, staff, and faculty perceive our school as a supportive university that puts the accent on teaching excellence and practical learning experiences. The university's emphasis on industry engagement and real-world applications is highly valued within the internal community." [2.a; 2.b; 2.c]

To uphold the first subtheme, creating a supportive and inclusive environment was reported to act as a solid basis for academic excellence. *A community-oriented approach* (23 %) was reported to facilitate high educational standards by providing access to the necessary resources, mentorship, and collaboration opportunities to excel. Additionally, HEIs that prioritize inclusion and mentoring were reported to cultivate greater career preparedness among graduates, as supported by the third most prominent subtheme (22 %).

Alignment between internal and external stakeholder perceptions (13 %) was reported not only to ensure transparency and trust but also to raise HEIs' standing in a highly competitive academic landscape. The following quotation illustrates how achieving a balance between these perspectives strengthens HEIs' ability to build and grow credibility and consistency across diverse audiences:

Participant 9: "There is a strong alignment, as both internal and external stakeholders acknowledge the university's commitment to excellence, innovation, and social contribution, reinforcing its reputable position." [2.a; 2.d]

Research

Industry was a central element of this theme and was the most frequently used term in responses, followed by *ranks, initiatives, address, reputation, needs*, and *challenges*. These keywords led to the identification of five key subthemes (Fig. B3). *National and global research impact* was the dominant category (24 %) within the *research* dimension (Table 5). It reflects the vital role of delivering research outcomes that not only enhance intellectual knowledge but also address pressing social and environmental challenges. Closely connected to the third subtheme (22 %), HEIs' commitment to impactful research illustrates their dual mission, given that they are also dedicated to improving quality of life and the environment. The second most relevant subtheme (23 %) reflects a concern for adopting new research initiatives that complement institutional reputation by focusing on specific areas of progressive research. The following quotations reflect these aspects:

Participant 5: "The University of Indonesia has a significant research impact at both the national and international levels, driven by its strong academic reputation, interdisciplinary approach, and contributions to addressing critical social challenges." [3.a; 3.b; 3.c]

Participant 14: "Our researchers focus on Arctic studies. Thus, our university makes real contributions to addressing global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development." [3.a; 3.b; 3.c]

Rankings are not only a measure of institutional performance but also a way to promote visibility and credibility, establishing HEIs as competitive and trustworthy global partners. Hence, *rankings and institutional prestige* (20 %) was another important subtheme, exemplifying the strategic importance of a university hierarchy:

Participant 3: "The reputation of the institution is loosely based on its research outcomes, but both the quality of the faculty and the facilities are also very important factors." [3.d; 3.e]

Despite being the least dominant subtheme, *infrastructure and support systems* (11 %) were reported to be indispensable for empowering research activities and promoting long-term development. Having modern facilities based on well-equipped laboratories directly contributes to research quality and productivity:

Participant 15: "We are doing our best to significantly contribute to management research, with our Research Lab dedicated to interdisciplinary studies in business." [3.b; 3.e]

Internationalization

The key concepts in the *internationalization* dimension were related to the terms *exchange, students, collaborative, programs, global*, and *partnerships*. These terms relate to partnerships, mobility, and joint programs, which are key aspects of the emerging subthemes (Fig. B4). *Developing strategic partnerships* was the dominant subtheme (39 %), whereas *adopting dual degrees and exchange programs* was the second most important subtheme (17 %), as shown in Table 6. By actively establishing long-term collaborations with international universities and organizations, HEIs create new research opportunities and strengthen

Table 4
Subthemes found for RC2 (stakeholder perceptions).

No.	Subtheme	Number of coding references	Percentage (%)
2.a	Academic excellence and educational reputation	39	31
2.b	Supportive and community-oriented environment	29	23
2.c	Graduate employability and career preparation	27	22
2.d	Alignment of internal and external perceptions	16	13
2.e	Multicultural recognition and global trust	13	11

Table 5
Subthemes found for RC3 (research).

No.	Subtheme	Number of coding references	Percentage (%)
3.a	National and global research impact	31	24
3.b	Progressive research initiatives	29	23
3.c	Addressing sustainability challenges through research	28	22
3.d	Ranking and institutional prestige	26	20
3.e	Infrastructure and support systems	14	11

Table 6
Subthemes found for RC4 (internationalization).

No.	Subtheme	Number of coding references	Percentage (%)
4.a	Developing strategic partnerships	59	39
4.b	Dual degrees and exchange programs	26	17
4.c	Enhancing international visibility	20	13
4.d	International recruitment	19	13
4.e	Enhancing global standing	13	9
4.f	Global problem-solving initiatives	13	9

interuniversity cooperation. Pathways for knowledge exchange bolster institutional connections, thus enhancing international visibility (13 %). The following quotations offer examples:

Participant 2: "The institution offers joint degree programs and collaborative research opportunities with international universities, attracting both students and faculty interested in global academic experiences … By planning international conferences, workshops, and cultural events, the institution creates specific environments for global academic interaction and develops a friendly atmosphere for international partners." [4.a; 4.b; 4.c; 4d; 4.f]

Participant 4: "International collaborations expand our academic horizons, facilitating cultural exchange and joint research endeavors." [4.a; 4.b; 4.c]

International recruitment also emerged as an important subtheme (13 %). It reflects HEIs' efforts to bring in faculty and students from around the world. Universities implement various mechanisms (e.g., international marketing campaigns and campus support) to create a competitive environment for international stakeholders:

Participant 6: "Our university actively recruits international students through global marketing efforts, partnerships with institutions, and participation in international education fairs." [4.a; 4.b; 4.d]

Participant 12: "Strategies to strengthen the university's position as a leading academic institution in Southeast Asia. These strategies focus on recruitment, partnerships, academic programs, and campus support systems." [4.a; 4.d; 4.e]

Rankings

The most frequent term in relation to the *rankings* dimension was *global*, followed by *enhancing, output, collaborations, students, development*, and *position*. Eight relevant subthemes were identified based on these keywords (Fig. B5). The dominant subtheme in the *rankings* dimension (22 %) was the essential role of rankings in enhancing how

Table 7
Subthemes found for RC5 (rankings).

No.	Subtheme	Number of coding references	Percentage (%)
5.a	Enhancing academic reputation through rankings	22	22
5.b	Global collaboration and talent attraction	20	20
5.c	Financial and structural challenges	16	16
5.d	Building stakeholder trust	12	12
5.e	Local relevance in global expectations	9	9
5.f	Program innovation	9	9
5.g	Publication output	9	9
5.h	Partnership opportunities	4	4

universities are perceived by stakeholders (Table 7). HEIs leverage their rankings to attract interest in cooperation from other academic institutions and talented teachers and students, in reference to the second most important subtheme (20 %). Thus, a virtuous circle is created whereby stronger partnerships boost rankings, which subsequently draw in more talent and open new paths for leading research and academic achievements. However, universities require considerable investment in research projects and publication fees to maintain their rankings. The following quotations support this idea and refer to another major subtheme regarding financial and structural challenges (16 %):

Participant 2: "For students, rankings highlight educational excellence and employability perspectives, while for faculty and researchers, they reflect opportunities for impactful work and collaboration. Industry partners and funders use rankings to assess the institution's suitability for partnerships" [5.a; 5.b; 5.d; 5.h]

Participant 8: "The institution faces challenges such as limited financial resources for extensive research projects." [5.c]

Participant 11: "The institution has undertaken several initiatives to improve its position in global rankings, including the allocation of special budgets for participation in international academic and research events. This allows faculty and researchers to present their work, network, and establish collaborations that enhance the institution's visibility. Additionally, the institution supports the publication process by covering fees for publishing in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals." [5.a; 5.b; 5.c; 5.g]

Participant 12: "We have focused on research outcomes, faculty recruitment, and curriculum development. Our increased emphasis on sustainability and collaborations with multinational companies enhanced our position." [5.a; 5.f; 5.g]

Unless sufficient financial resources are secured, limited funding restricts large-scale projects that contribute to academic output and ultimately rankings. Another challenge comes from enticing students and young professionals into research. To establish an atmosphere that encourages academic excellence and demonstrates the value of research to society, not only monetary investments but also mentorship are needed:

Participant 4: "One significant challenge could be attracting more young individuals to pursue careers in research. Encouraging students and early-career professionals to dedicate their time and effort to research requires sustained motivation, resources, and mentorship, as well as creating an environment that highlights the value and impact of research on society and professional development." [5.c; 5.d]

In sum, structural issues reflect the difficulty in matching institutional strengths, which are frequently based on regional frameworks, with global standards that might not adequately capture locally relevant variations. Institutions may feel pressure to shift priorities or reallocate resources due to such expectations, potentially weakening their ability to meet the requirements of the local community. The fifth identified subtheme (9 %) reflects these concerns:

Participant 10: "The University of Indonesia faces several challenges in improving its position in global rankings, stemming from both internal constraints and external factors. These challenges affect its ability to fully meet the criteria used by global ranking organizations such as QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education." [5.c; 5.e]

Communication strategy

The *communication strategy* dimension had seven subthemes (Fig. B6), associated with terms such as *social, media, community, achievements, platforms, engagement, students*, and *newsletters*. The most

Table 8
Subthemes found for RC6 (communication strategy).

No.	Subtheme	Number of coding references	Percentage (%)
6.a	Digital and social media outreach	53	35
6.b	Promoting academic and research achievements	30	20
6.c	Stakeholder-targeted events	19	12
6.d	Narratives and storytelling	17	11
6.e	Traditional outreach	17	11
6.f	Real-time stakeholder engagement	11	7
6.g	Leveraging alumni and student ambassadors	6	4

Table 9
Distribution of coding references for sentiment analysis.

Dimension of HEI reputation	Sentiment type			
	Very negative	Moderately negative	Moderately positive	Very positive
Brand, identity, and image (RQ1)	0	1	33	6
Stakeholder perceptions (RQ2)	0	0	50	3
Research (RQ3)	0	4	17	6
Internationalization (RQ4)	0	1	18	6
Rankings (RQ5)	0	4	12	8
Communication strategy (RQ6)	0	1	17	2

important subtheme was *social media and digital platforms* (35 %), which play a central role in contemporary HEIs' communication strategy (Table 8). To build an inclusive and stimulating environment, these digital tools create new opportunities for educational institutions to interact with a wide range of stakeholders, including students, faculty, and alumni. As reflected by the second most important subtheme (20 %), HEIs can encourage deeper engagement and present their accomplishments by allowing real-time interactions through the latest tools such as interactive content (e.g., podcasts and video series) based on storytelling by students and alumni. The following responses illustrate these key aspects:

> Participant 8: "Social media and digital platforms are essential in shaping the institution's reputation by enabling real-time engagement with stakeholders, disseminating information broadly, and enhancing visibility. These platforms allow the institution to showcase success stories, share updates, and interact with audiences on a personal level." [6.a; 6b; 6.d; 6.f]

> Participant 13: "Leveraging students, graduates' storytelling formats like podcasts or video series make the university's communication more relatable and inspiring for diverse audiences." [6.a; 6.b; 6.g]

Another important subtheme, *stakeholder-targeted events* (12 %), has a strong correlation with *traditional outreach* methods (11 %). Besides adopting modern outreach instruments, classical academic events such as open days, conferences, workshops, and newsletters continue to be essential to institutional communication plans:

> Participant 2: "We organize academic events and open days to engage our community, but we use press releases and social media content to promote our activities." [6.a; 6.b; 6.c; 6.e; 6.f]

> Participant 15: "The institution communicates its achievements through a variety of channels, including official press releases, newsletters, annual reports, and social media platforms. Additionally, events such as conferences, workshops, and public presentations are organized to highlight success and engage stakeholders." [6.a; 6.b; 6.c; 6.e; 6.f]

Sentiment analysis

The sentiment analysis complemented the thematic analysis by providing a deeper understanding of the emotional tone of responses and overall perceptions of HEI reputation. Based on the NVivo autocoding feature, participants' responses were grouped into four categories: very negative, moderately negative, moderately positive, and very positive. Table 9 summarizes the distribution of these sentiments across the six core dimensions of HEI reputation.

The sentiment coding results highlight a predominantly positive viewpoint. Each key reputational dimension reflects this trend. Moderately positive sentiments, in particular, characterized stakeholder perceptions (RQ2) and brand, identity, and image (RQ1). Coding references

of negative emotions were minimal, with only a few moderately negative attitudes, mainly toward the research (RQ3) and rankings (RQ5) dimensions. By contrast, the very positive emotions associated with these dimensions underscored their dual role as both an opportunity and a challenge in HEI reputation management. Similarly, HEIs' internationalization efforts (RQ4) and communication strategy (RQ6) were generally well perceived. However, potential for further strategic development was observed in this regard.

Discussion

Lafuente-Ruiz-De-Sabando et al. (2018) identified several gaps in the HEI reputation management literature, particularly a lack of consensus on the dimensions of reputation, a multitude of perceptions among different stakeholders, and a need for comprehensive models. The present research addresses these gaps by showing that reputation is determined by a combination of tangible factors such as academic quality, research output, and employability rates, along with intangible factors such as institutional branding and stakeholder trust.

RQ1 asked about the key factors that define and strengthen the brand, identity, and image of HEIs. Rauschnabel et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of university brand personality in promoting stakeholder engagement. The current findings extend their work by suggesting that academic performance, global engagement, and social issues are more decisive in shaping a resilient identity. Academic excellence, as a cornerstone of HEI reputation, aligns with global expectations and supports institutional credibility (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016; Sultan & Wong, 2013). Furthermore, incorporating sustainability and ethical leadership into academic missions is not only crucial for addressing global challenges but also strengthens universities' brand identity (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022). These initiatives indicate that institutional identity is rooted in trust, innovation, and adaptability, consistent with the prevailing trends in higher education branding and reputation management. By encouraging cross-cultural collaboration, prioritizing research excellence, and promoting inclusion, HEI managers can reinforce their overall institutional image and influence on society. The sentiment analysis supports this interpretation, revealing a consistent pattern of positive emotional responses to HEIs' strategic commitment.

RQ2 asked how HEIs shape stakeholder perceptions of their reputation. The results of the present study are in line with those presented by de Moraes Abrahão et al. (2024), who emphasized the multidimensional role of universities, particularly in supporting stakeholder engagement and advancing social responsibility. Reputation and institutional success depend not only on branding but also on meaningful social contributions. Stakeholder perceptions of HEIs are primarily shaped by academic standards, supportive environments, and employability outcomes rather than by institutional image alone. This finding contrasts with those of Kaushal and Ali (2020), who highlighted the role of image and student attachment in shaping reputation. Academic

excellence is characterized by a predominantly positive emotional tone and is reinforced by supportive environments. This finding is consistent with the views of Bovill et al. (2011), who explained how community-driven approaches enhance stakeholder satisfaction, thus creating a resilient environment and expanding reputation opportunities for HEIs. Moreover, by aligning curricula with labor market needs, HEIs can prepare graduates for their careers (Bridgstock, 2009). Such environments increase the alignment between internal and external stakeholder perceptions, enhancing global trust in HEIs (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). These findings offer valuable insights for HEIs aiming to strengthen their reputation through authentic academic value and stakeholder trust.

RQ3 asked how academic research and innovation contribute to strengthening HEI reputation. Grounded in prior studies (e.g., Eichberg & Charles, 2024; Kleespies & Dierkes, 2023; Salas et al., 2021), this inquiry finds that research outputs extend beyond academic contexts by also addressing pressing global needs. The need to ensure that research has a social impact is underlined by the growing demand for initiatives targeting sustainability. In this context, HEIs play an important role in promoting innovative research practices to improve resource management, curb climate change, and address social inequalities. The current findings extend the perspective of Miotto et al. (2019), who suggested that strong academic and operational performance organically build legitimacy, regardless of brand reputation strategies. Furthermore, whereas Rashid and Mustafa (2021) reported that universities' reputation is predominantly influenced by internal factors such as organizational culture and employee engagement, the current study suggests that external measurable indicators, particularly research impact and outcomes, are more important in shaping educational stakeholder perceptions and institutional success. Research productivity is substantially improved by strategic investment in infrastructure, and high-quality publications can increase HEI reputation (Teichler et al., 2013). The predominantly positive attitudes toward institutional research outputs encourage HEI administrators to seek to enhance reputation by investing in academic facilities and by aligning outputs with social priorities.

RQ4 asked about the role of internationalization strategies. The answers to this question highlight the complex nature of internationalization within the higher education system. Recent studies have revealed the importance of internationalization in higher education, particularly in terms of recruitment policies, exchange programs, and partnerships between universities (Tran et al., 2023; Zaman & Moshin, 2024). The current findings resonate with those of Knight (2022) and de Wit and Jones (2018), who have acknowledged the importance of these initiatives for increasing institutional visibility and global reputation. The present findings also extend existing research on international higher education as a source of soft power (Gauttam et al., 2024), showing that internationalization enhances institutional reputation by eliciting affective responses such as inclusion and stakeholder trust, supported by predominantly positive attitudes. Thus, HEI managers should adopt a combined approach that uses not only structural mechanisms but also stakeholders' emotional commitment to build sustainable institutional value.

RQ5 asked about the role of rankings in the strategic positioning of HEIs. Rankings are an important driver of institutional change, commonly associated with academic visibility and global partnerships. According to the findings of Hazelkorn (2015), the standing of an HEI influences perceptions of its quality, based on academic outcomes such as publishing in high-impact journals and participation in international conferences. Rankings also help HEIs navigate the competitive higher education landscape by acting as symbolic capital (Csató & Tóth, 2020; Usher & Savino, 2007). However, HEI rankings also reveal potential weaknesses (Khan et al., 2020; Xu, 2024), as reflected by respondents' sentiments and as aligned with patterns in key global rankings such as the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. Marginson (2016) reported the financial strain associated with global rankings in developing countries, and the present findings extend these concerns by revealing structural limitations such as difficulties in attracting motivated individuals suited to careers in research. These issues were perceived as major obstacles to achieving alignment with international standards. In this context, rather than being applied prescriptively, rankings should be used strategically for sustainable academic growth. HEIs should carefully consider their internal capabilities when defining reputation policies.

RQ6 asked about the role of communication strategy in engaging stakeholders and enhancing institutional reputation. The findings in response to this research question are consistent with research that has highlighted the progressive role of communication strategy within HEIs. Stakeholder outreach through digital platforms reflects the evolving nature of communication in the higher education sector while enhancing accessibility and flexibility (Wang, 2023; Zhao, 2024). Additionally, digital tools increase HEIs' visibility and reputation by enabling a dynamic communication process (Hassan, 2023). This process is based on students and alumni acting as ambassadors, using impactful storytelling formats to disseminate institutional messages. Centralized messaging across platforms ensures uniformity and improves the effectiveness of outreach initiatives. The adoption of these strategies has grown greatly in the higher education sector because of their benefits in promoting research accomplishments and increasing stakeholder engagement (Bitar & Davidovich, 2024; Qolamani & Mohammed, 2023). These results reflect the conclusions of Bharti et al. (2023) that stakeholder engagement improves when social media campaigns are combined with conventional academic events. Supported by a largely positive perception of the integration of digital innovation with conventional channels, HEIs are encouraged to adopt a unified multichannel communication strategy. In sum, communication is no longer a support tool but rather a core mechanism that requires intentional strategic alignment.

Theoretical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study underscores the need for a more comprehensive conceptualization of HEI reputation. Whereas previous research has often treated reputational components as distinct constructs, the findings of the present study suggest that they are in fact interrelated and should be examined within a unified framework. Reputation theory has traditionally focused on static assessments of organizational attributes (e.g., perceived quality, trust). In contrast, this cross-dimensional integration addresses a gap in reputation theory (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997) by emphasizing the dynamic interactions *between* the dimensions of HEI reputation. In particular, this study contributes to the academic discourse by presenting a well-supported multidimensional framework of reputation, which combines symbolic components (e.g., branding and rankings) with substantive components (e.g., research and communication strategy). In sum, in the higher education context, this study reframes reputation theory as a concept that develops multilaterally, with symbolism and performance coevolving.

The study also contributes to resolving the debate on whether reputation is primarily driven by external perceptions or internal performance metrics. The present results indicate that a balanced approach is necessary. Under such an approach, reputation results from both strategic institutional efforts and external evaluations by stakeholders. The conclusion of this research is that HEI reputation results from a balance between research, internationalization, stakeholder engagement, branding, and rankings. By acknowledging the roles of students, faculty, employers, alumni, and the broader community, the study shows that HEIs' reputational strategies must respond to a mixed set of expectations, consistent with the principles of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). Integrating the premises of reputation theory with those of stakeholder theory captures the reciprocal nature of reputation-building processes in HEIs. It also provides a theoretical foundation for advancing the applicability of reputation research in the higher education context.

Because the education system is constantly changing, so too is the higher education framework under the impact of both globalization and digitalization. Therefore, stakeholders must adapt and consider HEI reputation as a continuously evolving factor. Thanks to its qualitative research design, this study contributes to the theoretical framework by showing that stakeholder engagement and strategic communication play essential roles in HEI reputation. The current study thus extends existing theoretical models by including communication strategy as a mediator of the relationship between HEI reputation and stakeholder perceptions.

Practical implications

From a practical perspective, the findings offer valuable insights for university administrators and policymakers. Given the increasing competition among HEIs, they must look beyond traditional branding approaches by prioritizing quality indicators such as research impact, employability outcomes, and student satisfaction. The results of this study suggest that education leaders should integrate academic marketing strategies with measurable institutional improvements. In addition, strategies that focus on inclusion, sustainability, and leadership programs can not only meet current needs but also contribute to the long-term reputation of HEIs. Leadership programs might include strategies for career development and interdisciplinary collaboration. Meanwhile, sustainability initiatives could be linked to local community projects, thereby improving institutional visibility and strengthening trust within society.

HEIs should ensure that their stakeholder engagement strategies are highly targeted, given that different groups, such as students, faculty, employers, and the broader community, perceive reputation differently. Tailoring communication and service offerings to these groups could enhance institutional credibility and long-term stakeholder loyalty. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of communication platforms in managing stakeholder relations. The use of social media platforms and strategic digital content not only stimulates interaction between students and faculty but also helps build virtual communities. Centralized stakeholder engagement dashboards could be developed to integrate diverse feedback into institutional decision-making processes. However, digital tools should be complemented by structured, in-person academic events and communications to ensure that engagement is both interactive and relational.

Universities should attach great importance to key indicators such as the impact of research on reputation, student employability, and stakeholder perceptions. These indicators not only have great potential to improve rankings and external recognition but also encourage the implementation of performance monitoring systems that link academic performance to stakeholder feedback. The purpose of the present research is to guide HEIs in strengthening their reputation by focusing on stakeholder perceptions. They are encouraged to develop sustainable strategies that enhance institutional competitiveness and stimulate loyalty within their academic community and society. Furthermore, educational policymakers can use these insights to create strategic frameworks that align institutional values and core missions with social expectations. They can increase transparency and support for the higher education sector by including stakeholder-driven priorities into national education programs. Based on these recommendations, HEIs can strengthen both institutional reputation and long-term stakeholder trust by implementing regular stakeholder assessment mechanisms.

Conclusions

This study provides an integrated multidimensional understanding of reputation management in HEIs. It reinforces the idea that institutional success and credibility result from the combination of measurable academic factors and subjective stakeholder perceptions. Therefore, HEIs should adopt strategic approaches that integrate performance metrics with communication and stakeholder engagement strategies.

Each of the six core dimensions of HEI reputation explored in this study contributes to a robust reputation framework that can help HEIs navigate increasingly competitive and complex academic landscapes. A coherent brand identity aligns institutional values with stakeholder perceptions, in turn influencing trust, loyalty, and legitimacy. Research impact leads to global recognition and helps increase the relevance of HEIs for society, highlighting the role of rankings as important symbols of academic success and standing. Internationalization increases visibility, encourages discussion between different cultures, and promotes knowledge exchange, and it should be supported by an effective communication strategy that bridges internal actions with external views.

Practically, reputation depends not only on external branding but also on institutional quality, values, and stakeholder engagement. Institutions that excel in research, teaching quality, and graduate employability tend to build stronger reputations. Furthermore, stakeholder perceptions vary substantially across groups, making a one-size-fits-all approach to academic reputation management ineffective. HEIs must develop tailored strategies that reflect the specific priorities of students, faculty, alumni, and other partners. Investing in knowledge-driven and stakeholder-centered approaches allows institutions to anticipate community expectations and mobilize resources effectively. Therefore, reputation is both a strategic asset and a reflection of institutional integrity.

Limitations and future research directions

Despite the study's contributions, it has several limitations. First, the sample of 15 education leaders from different countries limits generalizability. This sample may not fully capture the views of other important stakeholders, particularly students and administrative staff. Future research should use extended samples and longitudinal case studies to strengthen the reliability of the present results. Second, although this study emphasizes the multidimensional nature of reputation, it does not develop a specific measurement model. Future studies should explore cross-cultural comparisons and stakeholder-specific configurational models to help create standardized tools for assessing HEI reputation. Investigating these areas could help refine academic reputation frameworks and offer practical insights for institutions looking to enhance their market positioning. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, researchers could further understand the relationships between institutional performance and stakeholder perceptions.

Future research should also combine quantitative and qualitative methods. A mixed-methods approach of structured Likert-item-based questionnaires complemented by qualitative interviews could reveal subjective interpretations. Such an approach would allow for more nuanced interpretations, particularly in relation to specific aspects of reputation. Quantitative tools could be used to assess the relationships between independent variables (e.g., perceived teaching quality, trust in graduate employability, and communication transparency) and outcome variables such as student satisfaction and employer trust. In conjunction, qualitative interviews could uncover hidden expectations. This combination could enhance the validity of reputation models and provide targeted evidence for policymaking.

Declaration of generative AI in the writing process

The authors used ChatGPT-4o exclusively to refine language and improve clarity of the text. No content or analysis was generated by AI.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dimitrie Stoica: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Software, Investigation, Visualization, Validation, Supervision. **Cristina-**

Claudia Patriche: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Visualization, Validation. **Sofia David:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Investigation, Visualization, Validation. **Camelia Mădălina Beldiman:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Investigation, Visualization, Validation. **Carmelia Mariana Dragomir Bălănică:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Investigation, Visualization, Validation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this work.

Appendix A

Table A1.

Table A1
Overview of open-ended questionnaire items by HEI dimension.

| HEI dimension	Open-ended questions
Brand, identity, and image	1. How would you describe the identity of your higher education institution?
	2. What factors do you think most strongly contribute to this institution's brand image?
	3. Could you provide an example of how the institution's actions have aligned with its stated mission and values?
Stakeholder perceptions	1. What are the main perceptions held by students, staff, and faculty about this institution?
	2. How do external stakeholders, such as employers and alumni, perceive the value of the institution's degrees?
	3. How do you think internal stakeholder perceptions (faculty, staff, and students) align with external ones?
Research	1. How do you perceive the institution's research impact at the national and international levels?
	2. What role do research outcomes play in shaping the institution's reputation?
	3. How well do you think the institution's research initiatives meet the needs of society or industry?
Internationalization	1. How do international collaborations contribute to enhancing the institution's global standing?
	2. What strategies does the institution employ to increase its international representation among students and faculty?
	3. Could you provide examples of how the institution has successfully built partnerships with universities or organizations from other countries?
Rankings	1. How do global rankings influence stakeholder perceptions of the institution's reputation?
	2. What initiatives has the institution undertaken to improve its position in global rankings?
	3. What challenges does the institution face in improving its ranking position?
Communication strategy	1. How does the institution communicate its achievements to its stakeholders?
	2. What roles do social media and digital platforms play in shaping the institution's reputation?
	3. How could your institution enhance its communication efforts to better reflect its brand identity?

Appendix B

Figs. B1–B6.
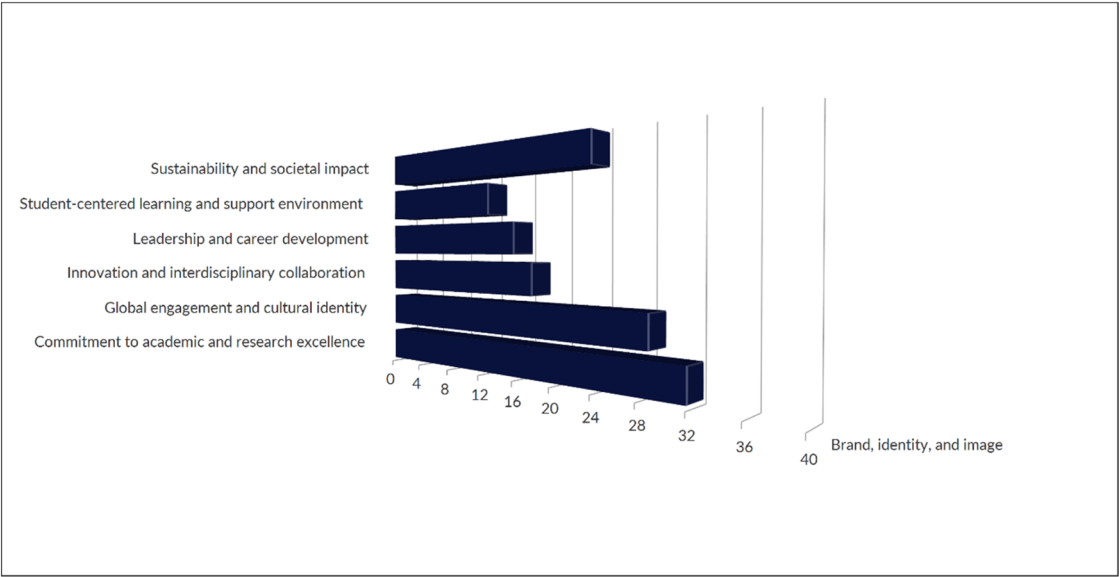
Fig. B1. Thematic analysis based on RQ1 (brand, identity, and image).
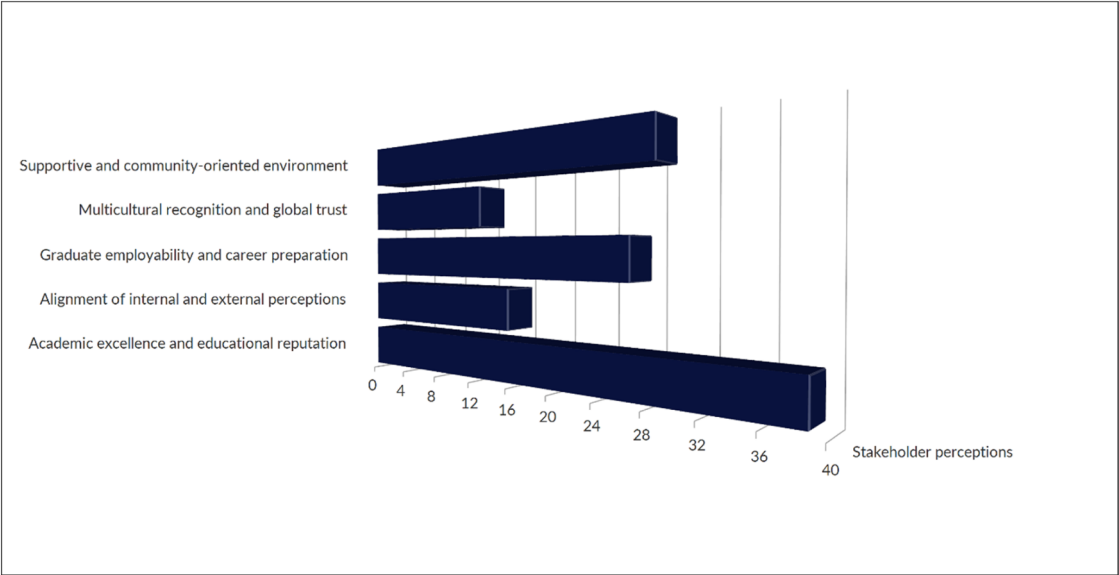
Fig. B2. Thematic analysis based on RQ2 (stakeholder perceptions).
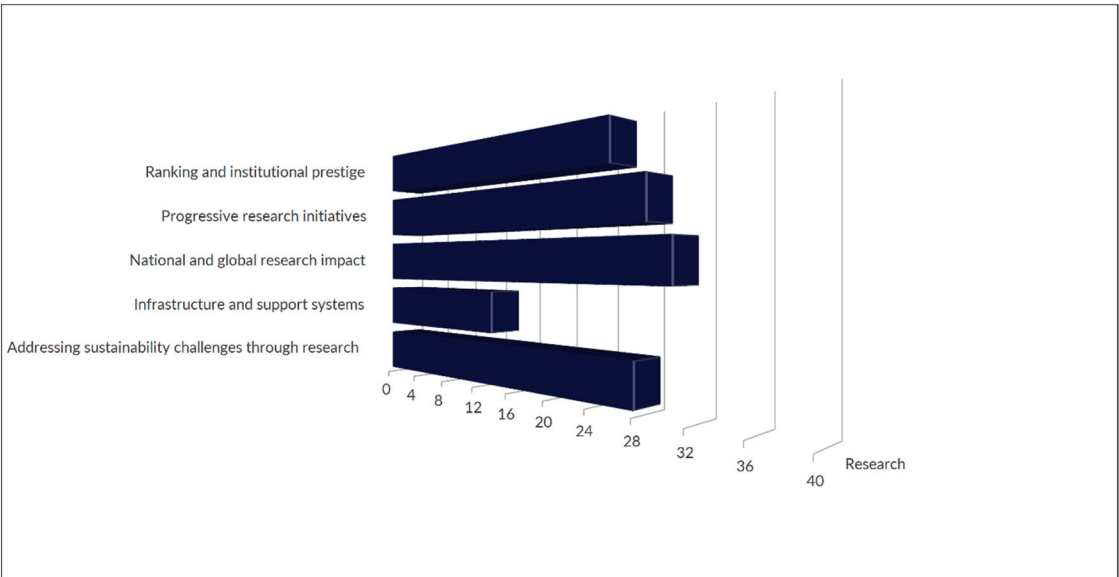

Fig. B3. Thematic analysis based on RQ3 (research).
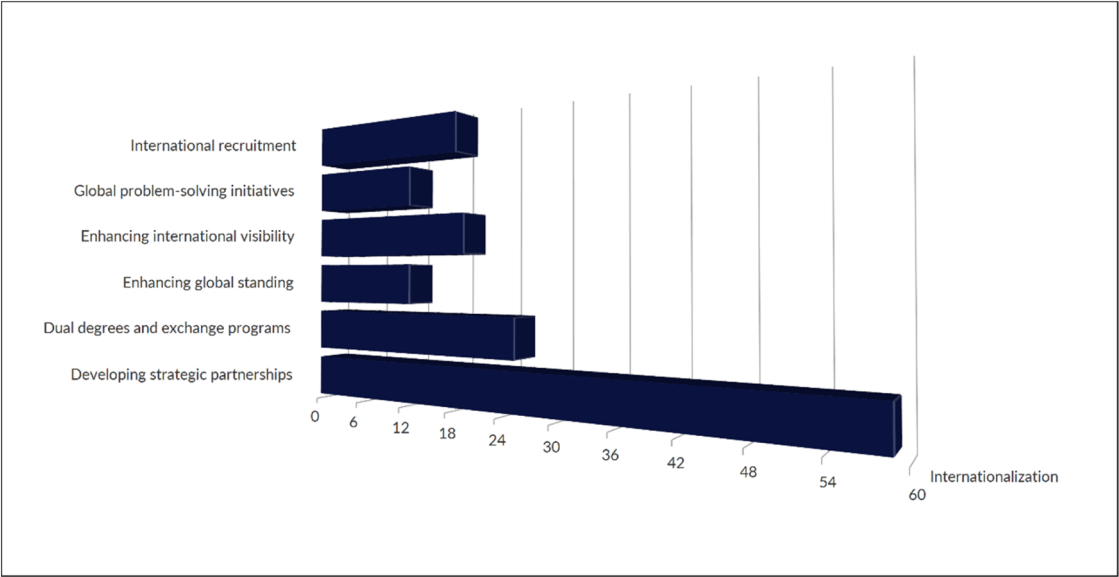
Fig. B4. Thematic analysis based on RQ4 (internationalization).
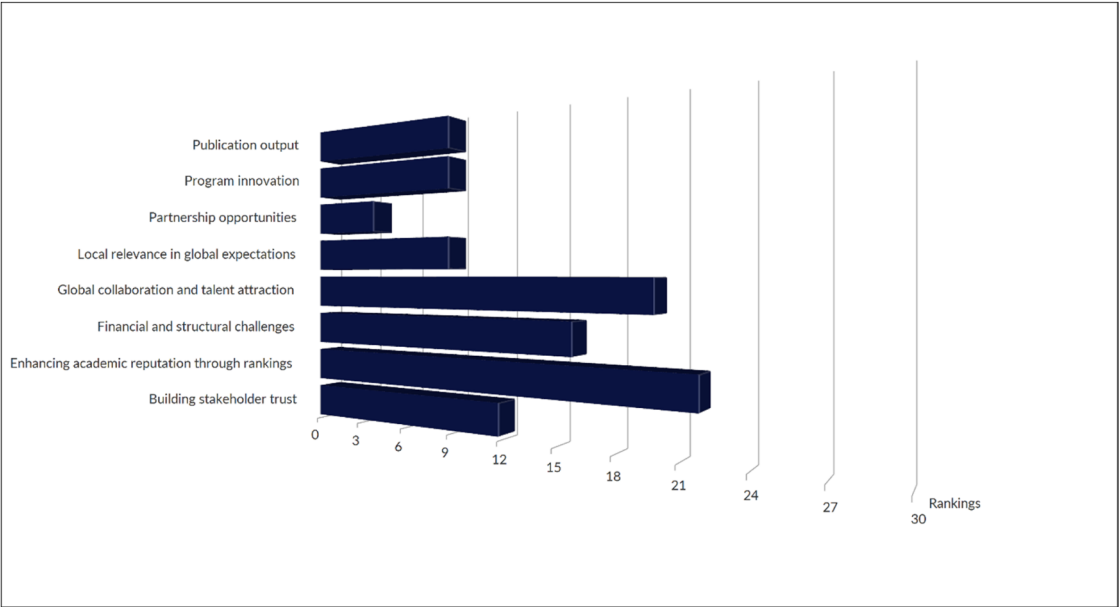

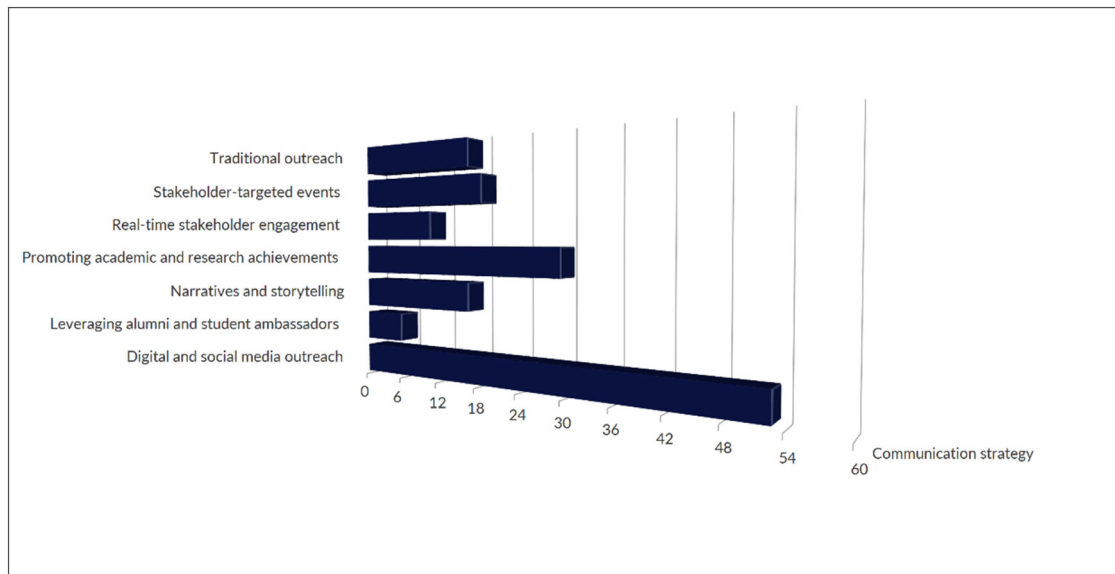**Fig. B5.** Thematic analysis based on RQ5 (rankings).

Fig. B6. Thematic analysis based on RQ6 (communication strategy).

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