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Prestige vs. Reputation: Significance to Improve Public Perceptions towards Malaysian University

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Corporate image and reputation is an essential element in any business organization. However, not many studies have been done on service-oriented organizations, especially universities. For the university that seeks to improve its reputation, creating desirable images and positioning of a university's image are important. This study obtained some interesting discoveries as well as answering the research objectives. The results suggest that the respondents had better perception of the university's prestige than its reputation. A comparison between the mean values across two groups that is the university's internal public and external public shows that the university's internal public perceptions on prestige, personality, and reputation were relatively high. Public perceptions on each of the university's image indicators were however moderate. This study also posits that the university's internal public perception of the university image was significantly different from the external public. The university internal public had a high or positive perception of the university image, whereas the external public's perception was only moderate. This study draws attention to the need for improving the external public's perception of the university. This will remove the perception that university is just an ivory tower and doing something that may not be relevant to the industries and society need.

Keywords: Malaysian university, prestige, corporate image, reputation, public perception

Image and reputation are the impressions that a person, an organization, or a product receives from both the internal and external public. In a globalized world, image is seen as one of the elements that are important for organizations. The public sees things in a package, in which image is a component that should not be neglected. The corporate image will reflect its potential in achieving goals, success, quality, and credibility. A good image is expected to bring favorable outcomes, such as attracting current and potential investments, developing loyal and sustainable relationships, enhancing customers' buying intentions and satisfaction, all factors that lead to an increase in sales and profits. This is because the focus of a business enterprise is to make a profit.

Forming a perception of a good image would weaken the negative influence of competitors and enable the organization to maximize profit. In a competitive business climate, businesses strive to create and communicate a positive image to customers, shareholders, financial community, and the general public. A company that mismanages or ignores its image is likely to be at risk. Similarly, it is important to create a positive image of an institution of higher learning in a market where students. However, as customers, universities have to implement strategies to maintain and enhance their competitiveness.

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The higher education sector in Malaysia develops rapidly since the 1990s. Today, Malaysia has 20 public universities and hundreds of private universities that offer varieties of courses. Competition in this sector does not only exist within the country but also regional and global levels. Thus, it is necessary for universities to develop competitive advantage and unique characteristics to play an increasingly important role in developing the economy of the nation (Ali et al., 2016).

Universities need to communicate these characteristics effectively and consistently to all relevant stakeholders. Here, corporate identity serves as a powerful source for competitive advantage (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Tremendous growth has been observed in the Malaysian higher learning industry, especially after the passing of the Private Higher Education and Institution Act 1996 (PHEIA 1996, Act 555). The growth in the number of both public and private higher-learning institutions (HLIs) is reflected by the increase in the number of institutions established from the year 1996 to current. In a competitive market, perhaps by looking at the relationships amongst corporate image, service quality, student's satisfaction and loyalty, would provide some useful insights to the management of higher learning institutions in terms of meeting the objective which is to increase the number of local and foreign postgraduate students' enrolment. There is a strong relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty, and much had been said about the advantages of securing customer satisfaction and loyalty. For example, it was discovered that an increase in customer satisfaction could be linked to customer loyalty and profit (Saeidi et al., 2015; Killburn et al., 2014; Mark, 2013).

Customers or the external public can become an important source of reference and disseminate the positive word of mouth about the institutions. Hence, the institutions need to understand how customers influence each other and how to manage these customer interactions (Blazevic et al., 2013). The practice of ascertaining factors that influenced customer satisfaction and loyalty, is observed to be widely accepted by most private services business organizations, which usually operate in a highly competitive market. However, such practice is not implemented by many public institutions, including public universities in Malaysia (Carter & Amy Chu-May Yeo, 2016).

The increase in the numbers of both public and private higher learning institutions in Malaysia has resulted in the higher education industry in the country becoming more competitive in terms of securing the best students to their respective institutions. Over the last decade, there has been an increased interest in the benefits of adopting a marketing orientation or marketization in the higher education sector (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010; Helgesen, 2008). A marketing orientation can assist both attraction and retention of students since an understanding of students' choice processes enables institutions to provide them with a high-quality tertiary experience (Bowden & Wood, 2011). In line with the marketing orientation, a student is regarded as a customer of the institution. Under this perspective, the nature of the service is 'people-based,' and the relationships that are created between the institution and its customers are pivotal to both pedagogical and business outcomes (Bowden & Wood, 2011). An important principle of marketing is that all marketing activities should be geared towards what customers want. It implies a focus on customers or ends consumers of the product or service. If customer requirements are not satisfactorily fulfilled, or if customers do not obtain what they want and need, then marketing has failed both the customer and the organization (Yi & Gong, 2013).

According to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006), higher-learning institutions (HEIs) are widespread and well-established as a global phenomenon, especially in major English-speaking nations such as the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. In the US, for example, HEIs are undergoing substantial change in terms of the way colleges and universities are functioning because of factors such as demographics, globalization, economic restructuring, and information technology.

These changes have led HEIs in the US to adopt new concepts of educational market and organizational structures. As the competition among them intensifies, they increasingly behave as business entities by adopting business strategies. In recent years, they have promoted the acceleration of international linkages, branch campuses, single-purpose programs, and other forms of transnational education and quality of education for customers.

In Malaysia, Malaysia Qualification Accreditation body (MQA) which was established on 1 November 2007 with the coming in force of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007. This entity is responsible to be a gatekeeper and ensure the quality of programs and courses offered is up to minimum standard because approval is granted for the program to be established in any of the colleges or universities for both public and private. As a quality assurance body, the roles of MQA (Malaysian Qualification Agency, 2018) are: (i) to implement MQF as a reference point for Malaysian qualifications; (ii) to develop standards and credits and all other relevant instruments as national references for the conferment of awards with the cooperation of stakeholders; (iii) to quality assure higher education institutions and programs; (iv) to accredit courses that fulfill the set criteria and standards; (v) To facilitate the recognition and articulation of qualifications; and (vi) to maintain the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR)

This indicates that the Malaysian government is very serious about the quality of education offered in this country, and students who will be an in-market force after graduated must be fully equipped with the necessary intelligence and information that would enable them to face challenges, especially in the labor force markets. Both parents and students' can consider themselves to be the main decision-makers to choose a program or courses that are reputable and give them better value for their money and are more selective in choosing an educational institution (Siti Falindah, Abdul Razak, & Rohaizad Baharun, 2010).

Literature Review

The recent study began to recognize the importance of attracting students and enhancing images as the competition for students is becoming more intense (Wilskin & Huisman, 2015). Universities can no longer sit back and wait for students' applications to come in. The higher institutions should emphasize service quality because of its strategic role in enhancing competitiveness, attracting new students, and retaining existing students (Sultan & Wong, 2013). Salleh et al. (2012) mentioned that for a university that seeks to improve its image or to create and manage new desirable image, consideration of the multiplicity of university stakeholders and the effects of numerous factors such as organizational, situational, personal and business are critical in the creation and management of the university image. They added that the present environment of increasing competitiveness, together with the growing limitation of public resources for university education and the social debate about the need for universities to improve their ability to generate income, makes image an essential part of modern strategic management of these institutions.

In an era of shrinking budgets and increased competition, for instance, caused a reduction in the number of students, specifically students pursuing doctoral degrees (Sheith Khidhir Abu Bakar, 2017). Thus, a strong university's image is considered a valuable asset (Suomi et al., 2014). The image of a university influences several decisions about a university's future (Suomi et al., 2014). It influences not only who will apply, but also the community's attitude about the institution and perhaps the level of funding by the state or private donors. To better comprehend the attitudes and characteristics that lead to the composite image or images, the attributes upon which image impressions are formed need to be better understood (Sharifah Faridah Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014).

Several local and international researchers have conducted studies on the image of higher education institutions, an increasing number of researchers are beginning to

realize the importance of researching the image of universities. A study by Sun and Yang (2008) have demonstrated how an institutional image can be applied in the context of higher education. Within this context, there are numerous methods to measure the image of a university. In another study, Kazoleas, Kim, and Moffitt (2001) highlighted the need to understand multiple organizational, situational, personal, and business factors in examining a university's image. Sung and Yang (2008) similarly argue that previous methods of image measurement are made up of a variety of variables that are inconsistent or lacking conceptual structure. In testing the dimensions of an image using the Structural Equation Model, these scholars have introduced a new model of measuring the image of a university that includes: university personality, external prestige, and university reputation.

Ziani, Elareshi, Alrashid, and Jaber (2018) assert that more amount of pragmatic knowledge and skills are required to enhance the quality of journalism in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) although GCC journalists have undergone adequate academic training in journalism. The Journalism curriculum sincerely tries to cover developmental issues in the region. The study reiterates the need for training sessions and practical programs in the journalism curriculum. Similarly, Alsaqer (2018) underlines the importance of public relations education, which shares a vital space in communication studies. The researcher raises varied perspectives on female Public Relations training students who have completed their formal PR education in Bahrain. The given study highlights the cultural context in Bahrain while deliberating perspectives on Public Relations pedagogies. Also, the study lays stress on leadership roles, image and power relationships, and develops an unique theoretical underpinnings of Public Relations education. While understanding the perception and practice of Public Relations among municipality employees in Ethiopia, Spurgeon and Wondimu (2018) unearths that employees have affirmative insight of public relations. The factors like gender, age, educational status, field of study and employees work division have not regressively influenced the position of public relations.

Kazoleas et al. (2001) examined the concept of university image from a cultural studies approach and a quantitative perspective. The study indicates that multiple changing images exist within each individual and that these images are affected by various factors. The study examines the university image from an external stakeholder perspective, using a telephone survey method. The results confirm multi-image conceptualization of the university setting and other important factors such as – personal, environmental, and organizational— give rise to the multiple-image concepts. The findings suggest that corporate image is also considered as receiver-oriented and audience-specific construct, can vary as a function of other external determining factors that influence organizational decision making regards to construction of image reputation.

Duarte, Alves, and Raposo (2010) studied organizational image construct, the process of image formation, and the impact of the different source factors on the university's image. A survey involving 1024 university students was conducted to test a conceptual model of university image formation through structural equations. The results show that the university social life atmosphere and employment opportunities are the most important predictors. This study helps universities to understand that related educational factors are not the only important factors, as they also should focus on how to successfully differentiate their institutions from other competitors.

Pampaloni (2010) also did a study that focuses on the decision-making process of students preparing to apply to college. High school students were surveyed at college open houses to identify the factors most influential to their college application decision-making. A multi-methods analysis found that institutional characteristics were more influential than interpersonal or informational resources used by students. More specific results revealed that size, housing, and knowing someone who attended a school predicted students' views of the school's atmosphere.

This research seeks to understand how Malaysians individuals with direct and no experience with the university perceive the image of a university in Malaysia based on a case study. This research draws upon Sung and Yang's (2008) model of measuring a university's image. The university's image will be measured in two folds: personality, prestige, and reputation and the influence of these perceptions towards the university. The research objectives of this study are: (i) to identify the perceptions towards the image of the university and (ii) to examine the relationship between image and attitude.

Methodology

This study employs a survey method to achieve its research objectives. This is because the survey method is suitable for descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory studies (Babbie, 2015). The use of survey method is most suitable because the main goal of this study is to gauge perception of the image of the university amongst Malaysians. This study has two main respondents: (i) The university's internal public such as employees (academic and non-academic staff), and (ii) The external public such as customers (current and former students), parents, and community that leave within university vicinity.

Multiple approaches were employed to reach the respondents. An online survey using emails and social media was used to collect data from the university's external public, while a telephone survey was conducted to gather information from the public. This study conducts a national survey considering it took into account the whole Malaysian population in estimating the sample size of the study. Using the confidence level (CL) of 95 percent and confidence interval (CI) of 3, the sample size of the study deduced from a total of 28 million of the Malaysian population and was estimated at 1067. The survey involved 1100 respondents. Out of the total number of respondents, 600 were in the university community category and 500 in the public category. A stratified sampling technique was adapted to ensure a representative sample. Stratified sampling is useful to select appropriate numbers of elements (or respondents) to be drawn from homogeneous subsets of a population (Babbie, 2015). There were two main respondents' categories (i.e., the university's internal public), and therefore two procedures of selecting respondents were employed as follow:

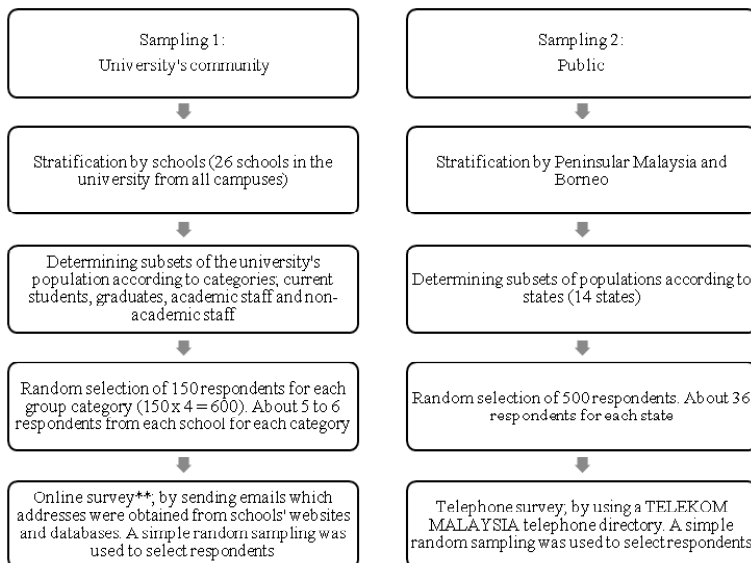


Figure 1. Two procedures for selecting respondents

This study used a questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions and was made available in both English and Bahasa Malaysia. Demographic information such as age and schools were asked using open-ended questions, while other information such as gender and race were asked using closed-ended questions. However, the online questionnaire consisted of three parts. Respondents were first asked to select the category of respondents they belong to. This selection would determine the next set of questions dedicated to each category of respondents. Respondents were required to provide information about their demographics. These questions required them to provide information about their gender, age, race, and education level. Respondents were then asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement that measured personality, prestige, and reputation. These questions were measured using a seven-point Likert scale with 1 indicates strongly disagree, and 7 signifies strongly agree. The results from current students, former students, staff, and the public were then individually categorized according to five different themes, which were directly linked to the conceptual framework below based on the university's personality, external prestige, and university reputation.

Analysis and Discussion

Identifying the National Perceptions towards the Image of the University

Descriptive analysis, which includes percentages and means, was used to discuss the level of perception of the university's image. Differences in perception between the university's community and the public were also tested using an independent sample *t*-test. To determine the level of perception, this study grouped 7-point Likert scale responses into three categories: (i) low for 1 and 2, (ii) medium for 3, 4, and 5, and (iii) high for 6 and 7. These categorizations are suitable for data of the categorical type. For continuous data, this study used the SPSS to create three cut points, which resulted in four groups: (i) 1 – 2.5, (ii) 2.5 – 4, (iii) 4 – 5.5, and (iv) 5.5 – 7. Two groups (groups 2 and 3) were combined to form the 'medium' category, while group 1 was identified as 'low' and group 4 as 'high' category. These categorizations guide the interpretation of the findings of this study.

The university's "personality" denotes the characteristics of its people and places. Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents have a positive perception of the university's personality. Responses from the non-academic staff or supporting staff (86%) were the highest followed by academic staff/former students (74%), current students (72%), and public (65.5%). More than a quarter of public respondents (38%) rated the personality of the university as moderate. Only 5% of the total respondents have a low or negative perception of the university's personality.

In this study, "prestige" refers to how the university is perceived externally (such as ranking and media coverage), while "reputation" deals with internal factors (such as students' welfare and financial stability). The results show that the majority of the non-academic staff rated prestige (88.7%) and reputation (80.7%) highly. A huge percentage of academic staff perceived prestige (73.3%) higher than reputation (64.7%). The same pattern of responses can be seen for current students, former students, and public respondents. The results suggest that the respondents have a better perception of the university's prestige than its reputation. Hence, this study posits the importance of improving performance from within (such as enhancing students' care, community/social service, management, and finance) to further improve the image of the university.

Table 1 shows that the majority of the non-academic staff (83.3%) and former students (80%) have a positive attitude towards the university. This is followed by the academic staff (76.7%), current students (74.7%), and public (61.4%). In general, the respondents' attitude towards the university was positive. There were only 12 respondents (1.1%) from the total sample who showed a negative attitude towards the university. The number of public respondents (61.4%) with a high or positive attitude was the lowest.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of respondents' perception of the university's personality, prestige, reputation and attitude according to five respondent categories

Respondent categories/ variables	Level	Current students	Former students	Academic Staff	Non-academic staff	Public	Total
Personality	High	108 (72%)	111 (74%)	111 (74%)	129 (86%)	328 (65.6%)	787 (71.5%)
	Medium	42 (28%)	38 (25.3%)	38 (25.3%)	20 (13.3%)	170 (34%)	308 (28%)
	Low	0 (7%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	2 (4%)	5 (5%)
	Total	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)
Prestige	High	118 (78.7%)	116 (77.3%)	110 (73.3%)	133 (88.7%)	330 (66%)	807 (73.4%)
	Medium	32 (21.3%)	33 (22%)	39 (26%)	15 (10%)	168 (33.6%)	287 (26.1%)
	Low	0	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (4%)	6 (5%)
	Total	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)
Reputation	High	101 (67.3%)	105 (70%)	97 (64.7%)	121 (80.7%)	300 (60%)	724 (65.8%)
	Medium	49 (32.7%)	44 (29.3%)	52 (34.7%)	28 (18.7%)	198 (39.6%)	371 (33.7%)
	Low	0	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	2 (4%)	5 (5%)
	Total	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)
Attitude	High	112 (74.7%)	120 (80%)	115 (76.7%)	125 (83.3%)	307 (61.4%)	779 (70.8%)
	Medium	37 (24.7%)	26 (17.3%)	34 (22.7%)	23 (15.3%)	189 (37.8%)	309 (28.1%)
	Low	1 (7%)	4 (2.7%)	1 (7%)	2 (1.3%)	4 (.8%)	12 (1.1%)
	Total	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	150 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)

Cut points: < 2.5 (low), 2.5 > 5.5 (moderate), > 5.5 (high)
Percentages (%) within respondent categories

A comparison between those with direct experience (current students, former students, and staffs) with those without experience (public) with the university (see Table 2) demonstrates that the university's community (76.5%) had more positive perception towards the university's personality compared to public respondents (65.6%). Similarly, positive responses of the university's prestige (79.5%) and reputation (70%) were higher amongst the university community than the public respondents (66% and 60%). The university's reputation as the lowest amongst the public. Since reputation was analyzed based on internal affairs such as student care and university management, the public without direct experience with the university may have little or no knowledge about how these affairs are carried out. As a result, 40% of public respondents rated the university reputation as being moderate (39.6%) and low (0.4%). Attitude towards the university among public respondents (61.4%) was also lower compared to the university community (78.7%). The findings indicate the potential effect of having direct experience with the university. Those who work and study (or used to study) at the university also have a better attitude and perception towards the university's personality, prestige, and reputation.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of respondents' perception of the university's personality, prestige, reputation and attitude according to two respondent categories; university community and Public

Respondent categories/ variables	Level	USM community	Public	Total
Personality	High	459 (76.5%)	328 (65.6%)	787 (71.5%)
	Medium	138 (23%)	170 (34%)	308 (28%)
	Low	3 (5%)	2 (4%)	5 (5%)
	Total	600 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)
Prestige	High	477 (79.5%)	330 (66%)	807 (73.4%)
	Medium	119 (19.8%)	168 (33.6%)	287 (26.7%)
	Low	4 (7%)	2 (4%)	6 (5%)
	Total	600 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)
Reputation	High	424 (70.7%)	300 (60%)	724 (65.8%)
	Medium	173 (28.8%)	198 (39.6%)	371 (33.7%)
	Low	3 (5%)	2 (4%)	5 (5%)
	Total	600 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)
Attitude	High	472 (78.7%)	307 (61.4%)	779 (70.8%)
	Medium	120 (20%)	189 (37.8%)	309 (28.1%)
	Low	8 (1.3%)	4 (8%)	12 (1.1%)
	Total	600 (100%)	500 (100%)	1100 (100%)

Cut points: < 2.5 (low), 2.5 > 5.5 (moderate), > 5.5 (high)
Percentages (%) within respondent categories

Table 3 presents the perception level on personality, prestige, and reputation based on mean and standard deviation values. The results show that the respondents perceived the university prestige ($M = 5.57, SD = 1.12$) the highest, followed by personality ($M = 5.46, SD = 1.05$) and reputation ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.10$). The standard deviation values were low, which indicated clustered responses. In order words, respondents responded in almost similar patterns, and the spread of the data was not large.

These variables were measured using the 7-point Likert scale, and the results show that the mean values fall between the scale of 5 and 6. Thus, it can be understood that the level of perception was high. Using the level of perception categories on continuous data discussed earlier, values above 5.5 are considered high. Table 3 shows that the overall mean values for prestige ($M = 5.57$) was high; whilst personality ($M = 5.46$) and reputation ($M = 5.36$) were moderate. A comparison between the mean values across two groups (i.e., university community and public) shows that the university community's perceptions of prestige ($M = 5.76$), personality ($M = 5.67$), and reputation ($M = 5.50$) were relatively high. Public perception on each of the university's image indicators was, however, moderate.

Table 3: Analysis of overall mean and standard deviation values for personality, prestige, and reputation

Variables	<i>M (SD)</i>		
	University community	Public	Total
Prestige	5.76 (1.08)	5.34 (1.09)	5.57 (1.12)
Personality	5.67 (1.08)	5.23 (.96)	5.46 (1.05)
Reputation	5.50 (1.17)	5.19 (.98)	5.36 (1.10)

Total number of respondents (N= 1100)

Measurement is based on 7-point Likert Scale

To better understand what contributes to the overall mean values in Table 3, the subsequent table (Table 4) describes respondents' perception of each item used to measure personality, prestige, and reputation. For personality items, the results show that respondents have high or positive perception on the stability of university as an institution of higher learning ($M = 5.61$), the university's beautiful landscape ($M = 5.57$), the eco-friendliness of the university ($M = 5.53$) and the university's conducive environment for learning and working ($M = 5.52$). On the other hand, the respondents rated moderately (responses below 5.5) four personality items: friendly people, commitment to the well-being of its people, great facilities, and commitment to community service. These are amongst the identified areas that require further improvements.

As for prestige, respondents perceived the university as a prestigious university ($M = 5.75$), and similarly, they thought that their friends/acquaintances also have high/positive perception ($M = 5.55$) towards the university. Two particular areas that were categorized as moderate are the ranking of the university ($M = 5.46$) and positive media coverage of the university ($M = 5.46$). Hence, this study highlights the importance of participating in the ranking system so that the standing of the university can be evaluated against other universities at the national and international levels. Besides, media coverage on the university should be closely monitored and strategically planned for wider access.

In terms of reputation, respondents' perception of the university's prospects for future growth was high ($M = 5.51$). The other areas which were moderately rated by the respondents are student care, social responsibility, management, and financial stability of the university. As this study found that the respondents' perception of reputation was the lowest compared to personality and prestige, it can be deduced from the findings that these areas also require attention.

Table 4. Analysis of mean and standard deviation values for each indicator of personality, prestige, and reputation

Statements	<i>M (SD)</i>
<i>Personality</i>	
The stable higher learning institution	5.61 (1.21)
Beautiful landscape	5.57 (1.28)
Eco-friendly	5.53 (1.24)
Conducive environment for learning/working	5.52 (1.24)
Friendly people	5.44 (1.25)
Committed to the well-being of its people	5.34 (1.26)
Great facilities	5.27 (1.29)
Committed to community service	5.14 (1.23)
Committed to community service	5.14 (1.23)
<i>Prestige</i>	
The university is a prestigious institution in society	5.75 (1.19)
My acquaintances/friends think highly of the university	5.55 (1.28)
The university successfully retains a prestigious place in various university ranking system	5.46 (1.23)
Media coverage about the university is very positive	5.46 (1.23)
<i>Reputation</i>	
The university has strong prospects for future growth	5.51 (1.21)
The university puts student care as the top priority	5.41 (1.27)
The university is a socially responsible university	5.40 (1.18)
The university is well managed	5.28 (1.26)
The university is financially sound	5.17 (1.27)
Total number of respondents (N= 1100)	
Measurement is based on 7-point Likert scale	

The results in Table 4 suggest that there were small differences in the mean values across the items. Table 5 supplements the findings by summarizing the percentages of responses according to different respondent categories. The purpose of doing this was to identify the extent of favorable or unfavorable responses on each indicator according to groups. Table 5 shows the tendency for public respondents to rate the university moderately in most fields except for 'the university is a prestigious institution in the society' (64.2% rated high) and 'the university is financially sound' (60.2% rated high). Also, only a small number of academic staff (29.3%) thought that the university is financially stable. They also felt that the university is not well managed (only 38% rated high). Non-academic staffs perceived financial stability (62%) and management (63.3%) of the university were slightly lower than other areas (> 70% rated high in other areas). Less than 50% of the current students provided a positive response on 'friendly people' (44.7%), and 'the university is financially sound' (46.7%). Former students also perceived that people in the university are not friendly (only 47.3% rated high). The results suggest that different categories of individuals have different perceptions of each indicator that makes up the measurement of the university's image.

Table 5. Percentages of respondents' perception of each indicator of personality, prestige, and reputation according to group categories

Respondent categories/ Variables	Level	Current students (n = 150)	Former students (n = 150)	Academic Staff (n = 150)	Non- academic staff (n = 150)	Public (n =150)
<i>Personality</i>						
Stable higher institution	High	67.3%	74%	71.3%	83.3%	44%
	Medium	32%	22%	26.7%	14%	53.8%
	Low	0.7%	4%	2%	2.7%	2.2%
Beautiful landscape	High	65.3%	77.3%	60.7%	82%	42.6%
	Medium	30.7%	20.7%	38%	16.7%	55.2%
	Low	4%	2%	1.3%	1.3%	2.2%
Eco-friendly	High	60%	68%	63.3%	76.7%	44%
	Medium	38%	27.3%	34.7%	21.3%	53.2%
	Low	2%	4.7%	2%	2%	2.8%
Conducive environment for learning/working	High	61.3%	67.3%	63.3%	76%	48.6%
	Medium	36%	28.7%	34.7%	21.3%	48.8%
	Low	2.7%	4%	2%	2.7%	2.6%
Friendly people	High	44.7%	47.3%	60%	70%	54.8%
	Medium	51.3%	50.7%	36.7%	26.7%	42.6%
	Low	4%	2%	3.3%	3.3%	2.6%
Committed to the well-being of its people	High	54%	62.7%	50%	70%	38.4%
	Medium	40.7%	32.7%	44%	26.7%	59.6%
	Low	5.3%	4.7%	6%	3.3%	2%
Great facilities	High	49.3%	54%	41.3%	70%	40.2%
	Medium	44%	40.7%	54%	28%	57%
	Low	6.7%	5.3%	4.7%	2%	2.8%
Committed to community service	High	64%	59.3%	55.3%	78.7%	38%
	Medium	35.3%	37.3%	41.3%	19.3%	59.2%
	Low	7%	3.3%	3.3%	2%	2.8%
<i>Prestige</i>						
The university is a prestigious institution in society	High	68.7%	74.7%	66%	80.7%	64.2%
	Medium	30.7%	20.7%	32%	17.3%	32.6%
	Low	.7%	4.7%	2%	2%	3.2%
My acquaintances/friends think highly of the university	High	72.7%	69.3%	64.7%	80%	45%
	Medium	26%	26.7%	33.3%	18%	50.6%
	Low	1.3%	4%	2%	2%	4.4%
The university successfully retains a prestigious place in various university rankings system	High	66.7%	65.3%	52%	74%	47.2%
	Medium	31.3%	30%	46.7%	24.7%	48.8%
	Low	2%	4.7%	1.3%	1.3%	4%
Media coverage about the university is very positive	High	58%	56.7%	54.7%	77.3%	46%
	Medium	40%	39.3%	44.7%	21.3%	50%
	Low	2%	4%	.7%	1.3%	4%
<i>Reputation</i>						
The university has strong prospects for future growth	High	69.3%	68%	52.7%	80.7%	39.8%
	Medium	29.3%	26.7%	45.3%	18%	57.8%
	Low	1.3%	5.3%	2%	1.3%	2.4%
The university puts student care as the top priority	High	52%	55.3%	55.3%	77.3%	53.2%
	Medium	41.3%	38%	41.3%	20%	44%
	Low	6.7%	6.7%	3.3%	2.7%	2.8%
The university is well managed	High	60.7%	61.3%	48%	70.7%	43.2%
	Medium	38%	33.3%	49.3%	28%	54.6%
	Low	1.3%	5.3%	2.7%	1.3%	2.2%
The university is financially sound	High	52.7%	60.7%	38%	63.3%	41%
	Medium	4.07%	34.7%	57.3%	35.3%	56.2%
	Low	6.7%	4.7%	4.7%	1.3%	2.8%

Categorization of levels: 1-2 (low), 3-5 (moderate), 6-7 (high)

Percentages (%) within respondent categories

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the respondents' perceptions of each variable of the study (prestige, personality, reputation, and attitude) between the university community and the public. The results show that the mean scores of prestige, personality, reputation, and attitude were high for the university community, while mean scores for the public were moderate. Table 6 shows that there were significant differences in the mean scores of prestige ($t = 6.36, p = .000$), personality ($t = 6.98, p = .000$), reputation ($t = 4.73, p = .000$), and attitude ($t = 7.10, p = .000$) between the university community and the public.

This study, therefore, posits that the university community's perception of the institution's image was significantly different from the public. The university community had a high or positive perception of the university's image, whereas the public's perception was only moderate. This study draws attention to the need to improve the public's perception of the university.

Table 6. Test of difference between the perception of the university community and public respondents on personality, prestige, and reputation

Variables	The university community M (SD)	Public M (SD)	Mean difference t (p)
Prestige	5.76 (1.08)	5.34 (1.09)	6.36 (.000)
Personality	5.67 (1.08)	5.23 (.96)	6.98 (.000)
Reputation	5.50 (1.17)	5.19 (.98)	4.73 (.000)
Attitude	5.85 (1.21)	5.33 (1.21)	7.10 (.000)

Total number of respondents (N= 1100)

Measurement is based on the 7-point Likert scale Examining the relationship between image and attitude

This study explored the relationships between variables. It was expected that all variables related to the university's image (personality, prestige, and reputation) are inter-correlated to provide a supportive attitude towards the university. The results show that there were strong and positive correlations amongst the variables. This study found that reputation was significantly correlated with prestige ($r = .813$) and personality ($r = .811$). The relationship between personality and prestige ($r = .777$) was also significant.

Meanwhile, the attitude was found to be significantly correlated with personality ($r = .721$), prestige ($r = .782$), and reputation ($r = .716$). The strength of all relationships was strong ($r > .7$). These significant relationships demonstrate the association between perception of personality, prestige, and reputation of the university with a supportive attitude towards the university. This study, therefore, suggests that the sustainability of the university image involves maintaining and upgrading its personality, prestige, and reputation.

Table 7. Correlations of personality, prestige, reputation, and attitude

Variables	<i>r</i> (<i>p</i>)			
	Personality	Prestige	Reputation	Attitude
Personality	-	.777** (.000)	.811** (.000)	.721** (.000)
Prestige	.777** (.000)	-	.813** (.000)	.782** (.000)
Reputation	.811** (.000)	.813** (.000)	-	.716** (.000)
Attitude	.721** (.000)	.782** (.000)	.716** (.000)	-

Total number of respondents (N= 1100)

Level of significance at * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

The study was also interested in identifying variables that can be considered as significant predictors to create a supportive attitude towards the university. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to discover this. This involves regressing attitude on the three independent variables: personality, prestige, and reputation. Table 8 shows that personality, prestige, and reputation were all significant predictors for a supportive attitude towards the university. The model as a whole was significant ($R^2 = .647$, $p = .000$) and explained 65% of the variance in attitude. The strongest predictor was prestige ($\beta = .508$, $p = .000$) that explained about 18% of the variance in attitude. Personality (4%) and reputation (0.9%) only significantly affected attitude as their contributions were rather small. Hence, this study posits the importance of prestige in accessing the university's image. Prestige involves how people perceive the university as a prestigious institution and how they perceive other people's thoughts about the university. Prestige also involves the position of the university within the ranking system and positive media coverage about the university.

This study discovered that the first two criteria had been satisfied, but the university's ranking and media coverage remain unsatisfied. This study, therefore, suggests that certain recommendations on improving these two important areas. First, impactful coverage of the university achievements and contributions in the mainstream media should be elevated. Second, this study recommends placing the university back into the university ranking system as this would bring prestige and improve its image.

Table 8. Overall Model of Multiple Regression Analysis including personality, prestige and reputation variables in predicting supportive attitude towards the university

Variables	Attitude towards USM	
	$\beta(p)$	sr^2
Personality	.234 (.000)	.044
Prestige	.508 (.000)	.179
Reputation	.113 (.002)	.009
R^2	.647	
Adjusted R^2	.646	
F	669.201	
Sig.	.000	

Total number of respondents (N= 1100)

Level of significance at * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study managed to obtain some interesting discoveries as well as answering the research objectives. For the first objective, the results suggest that the respondents had a better perception of the university's prestige than its reputation. Hence, this study posits the importance of improving performance from within, such as enhancing students' care, community or social service, management, and finance to further improve the image of the university. For the second objective, which is to examine the relationship between image and attitude, the results show that there were strong and positive correlations among variables. This study, therefore, suggests that certain recommendations on improving these two important areas. First, impactful coverage of the university achievements and contributions in the mainstream media should be elevated. Second, this study highly recommends placing the university back into the university ranking system as this would bring more prestige to the university and improve its image. These significant relationships

gave some evidence of the association of a high level of perception on personality, prestige, and reputation of the university with a high level of supportive attitude towards the university. This study, therefore, suggests that the sustainability of the university image involves maintaining and upgrading its personality, prestige, and reputation.

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