Marketing-Driven Enhancements in Student Experience and Their Influence on University Reputation

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Abstract: *This study explores the effect of innovative marketing strategies on university reputation, with perceived value acting as a mediating variable, within the context of Universitas Negeri Makassar. A quantitative approach using structural equation modeling via Smart PLS was employed to examine four independent variables: brand positioning and image strategy, digital marketing strategy, gamified engagement tools, and student co-creation participation. Findings indicate that brand positioning and digital marketing significantly influence perceived value and university reputation. Meanwhile, gamified engagement and student co-creation primarily impact perceived value but do not directly affect reputation. Perceived value has a strong and statistically significant effect on university reputation, mediating the relationship between several marketing strategies and institutional reputation. The study underscores the strategic value of enhancing students' perceived educational value through student-centered marketing to build reputational capital. It contributes to higher education marketing literature and offers practical insights for university leaders aiming to strengthen institutional image.*

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive global education market, the reputation of higher education institutions (HEIs) has emerged as a critical intangible asset, influencing students' enrollment decisions, funding allocations, research collaborations, and graduate employability. University reputation encompasses a complex interplay of stakeholder perceptions, institutional performance, and communicative strategies that contribute to prestige and credibility (Amado Mateus et al., 2024; Fombrun, 1996). While international university rankings often serve as proxies for reputation, their validity has been questioned due to their limited focus on metrics that usually exclude student-centered outcomes (Amado Mateus et al., 2024; Walker, 2010).

Consequently, scholars have called for a more holistic approach incorporating student perceptions and experiences into conceptualizing university reputation (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020; Veas-Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Within this context, innovative marketing strategies have gained prominence as tools for influencing prospective and current students, building brand awareness, and enhancing institutional positioning (Schidolski et al., 2023; Soares et al., 2021). These strategies, often rooted in digital communication channels and interactive platforms, facilitate the alignment of university offerings with the expectations of digital-native generations (Besseah et al., 2017; EDUCAUSE, 2020). Social media, gamified learning environments, and co-creation initiatives are increasingly leveraged to foster student engagement and emotional connection to the institution (Balaji et al., 2016; Foroudi et al., 2019). However, the relationship between such innovations and institutional reputation remains underexplored in empirical literature, particularly in their mediating mechanisms.

Student engagement and experience, as extensions of relationship marketing in higher education, are now seen as key determinants of value creation and brand loyalty (Bryson, 2016; Bovill, 2019). Recent literature has highlighted how co-creation strategies—where students are involved in curriculum design, feedback loops, and learning personalization—can generate mutual value for students and institutions (Zarandi et al., 2024; Bovill et al., 2011). These participatory practices enable universities to move beyond the traditional top-down model of educational delivery and instead adopt a collaborative approach aligned with service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). As students take on active roles as partners and co-producers of their learning environments, the resulting experiences tend to influence their perceived value of the education received and their perception of institutional reputation (Mateus et al., 2024; Ledden et al., 2013).

Perceived value, the cognitive and emotional evaluation of educational outcomes relative to the investment made, is a pivotal mediating variable in the link between student experience and university reputation (Gómez-Bayona et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). It integrates dimensions such as functional utility, epistemic gains, emotional fulfillment, and social recognition (Serna-Loaiza et al., 2022; Veas-Gonzalez et al., 2023). As institutions innovate their marketing strategies and pedagogical approaches, how students assess value evolves accordingly, thus influencing their advocacy behaviors, satisfaction levels, and loyalty intentions (Peruta & Shields, 2019; Mostafa, 2015). Yet, despite the growing interest in perceived value, few studies have empirically examined its role as an intervening factor in the relationship between marketing innovations, student engagement, and institutional reputation (Dollinger et al., 2018; Eldegwy et al., 2018).

The literature further suggests that student perceptions of value and reputation may vary across cultural and institutional contexts, reflecting differences in service expectations, branding strategies, and socio-educational structures (Li et al., 2023; Jayadeva et al., 2023). This complexity underscores the need for a comprehensive model that accounts for the dynamic and interdependent nature of marketing innovations, student experiences, perceived value, and university reputation. While prior studies have explored each of these constructs in isolation,

an integrated empirical investigation is required to establish causal relationships and determine actionable insights for institutional marketing and management (Giner et al., 2016; Balaji et al., 2016).

Despite growing interest in these constructs, few empirical studies integrate them within a single model, especially in the context of Indonesian higher education. This study addresses this gap by examining how marketing innovations affect perceived value and, in turn, university reputation at Universitas Negeri Makassar. The research aims to test a conceptual model that incorporates digital marketing, brand positioning, gamified tools, and co-creation, with perceived value serving as a mediating variable. This model offers both theoretical contributions and practical implications for institutional marketing.

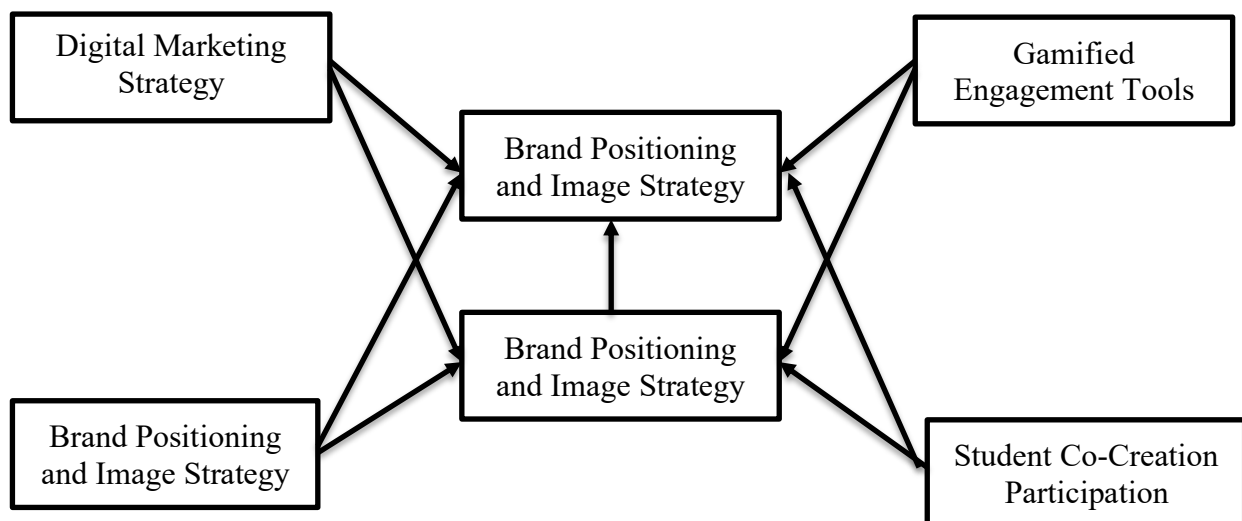The following is the framework of thought in this research:

Figure 1. Framework

Research Methods

A quantitative method was employed to target undergraduate students at Universitas Negeri Makassar who had sufficient exposure to institutional marketing. Respondents were purposively selected from semester 4 and above. A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated measurement items from previous studies, including constructs such as brand positioning and image strategy, digital marketing strategy, gamified engagement tools, student co-creation participation, perceived value, and university reputation (Ledden et al., 2013; Foroudi et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018). Each item was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to ensure standardization and comparability. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, targeting active students who had sufficient exposure to institutional marketing practices and learning experiences. A minimum sample size of 200 was determined to be appropriate, consistent with the requirements of structural equation modeling (SEM) and the guidelines for robust model estimation in Smart PLS (Hair et al., 2019).

Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 3.0, which is suitable for modeling complex relationships among latent constructs, particularly when the model includes mediation paths

and formative indicators (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Before structural analysis, a two-stage assessment of the measurement model was conducted, evaluating reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity through indicators such as composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). The structural model was then tested to examine the significance of path coefficients and mediating effects using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples to ensure robustness. Hypotheses were evaluated based on the path coefficients' size, direction, and relevance. This methodological approach ensures a rigorous examination of the theoretical model and provides empirical insights into the role of perceived value in linking marketing innovations to university reputation.

Result and Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical evidence on the relationships between marketing innovation strategies, perceived value, and university reputation within the context of Universitas Negeri Makassar. Utilizing structural equation modeling through Smart PLS, the analysis evaluates both direct and indirect effects among the constructs, offering insights into how strategic efforts in brand positioning, digital marketing, gamified engagement, and student co-creation influence students' perceived value and institutional reputation. The findings validate the proposed hypotheses and highlight the mediating role of perceived value, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how marketing innovation enhances the university's image and stakeholder perceptions.

Table 1. Outer Loadings of Measurement Items

Indicator	Brand Positioning and Image Strategy	Digital Marketing Strategy	Gamified Engagement Tools	Perceived Value	Student Co-Creation Participation	University Reputation
BPIS1	0.905					
BPIS2	0.734					
BPIS3	0.724					
DMS1		0.762				
DMS2		0.904				
DMS3		0.858				
GET1			0.965			
GET2			0.893			
GET3			0.625			
PV1				0.818		
PV2				0.840		
PV3				0.808		
SCP1					0.922	
SCP2					0.925	
SCP3					0.808	
UP1						0.818
UP2						0.892
UP3						0.806

Source: Research result

The outer loading values in this study indicate that most measurement indicators demonstrate strong and acceptable factor loadings above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). All indicators for Brand Positioning and Image Strategy, Digital Marketing Strategy, Perceived Value, Student Co-Creation Participation, and University Reputation meet the criteria for convergent validity, indicating that each item is a good representative of its latent construct. Although GET3 (Gamified Engagement Tools) has a loading of 0.625, slightly below the threshold, it is still within an acceptable range for exploratory research. It may be retained if the construct's composite reliability and AVE remain satisfactory. Overall, the measurement model exhibits strong indicator reliability, which supports the structural model analysis.
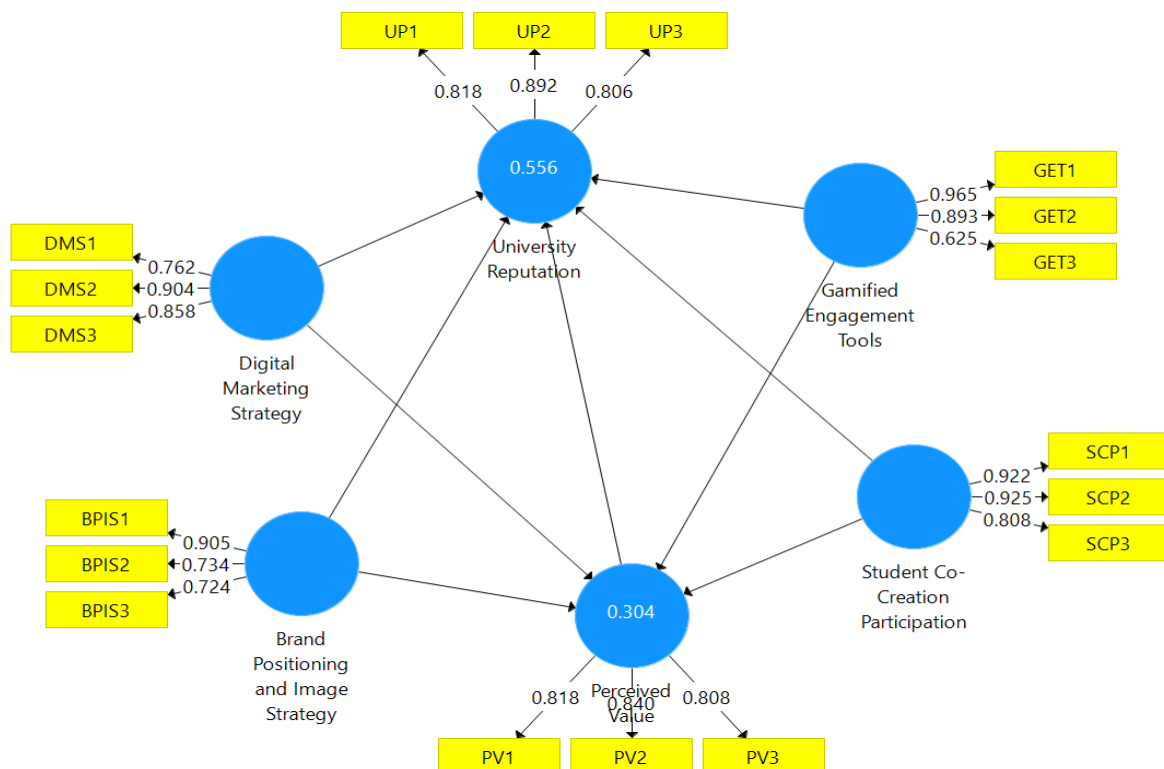
Figure 2. Bootstrapping Test

Table 2. Construct Validity and Reliability Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Rho_A
Brand Positioning and Image Strategy	0.746	1.000	0.627	0.833
Digital Marketing Strategy	0.798	0.838	0.712	0.881
Gamified Engagement Tools	0.806	1.127	0.707	0.875
Perceived Value	0.760	0.760	0.676	0.862
Student Co-Creation Participation	0.866	0.928	0.786	0.916
University Reputation	0.789	0.791	0.704	0.877

Source: Research result

The validity and reliability test results indicate that all constructs in the model meet the recommended thresholds for internal consistency and convergent validity. Cronbach's Alpha values are above the acceptable limit of 0.70, indicating high internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). Composite Reliability (CR) values also exceed the standard threshold of 0.70, confirming the reliability of the constructs. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for

all constructs are above 0.50, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity and confirming that more than half of the variance of the indicators is captured by their respective constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, the Rho_A values, which provide a more accurate reliability estimate, also support the robustness of the measurement model. Overall, the constructs exhibit strong measurement properties suitable for structural model assessment.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity – Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	Brand Positioning and Image Strategy	Digital Marketing Strategy	Gamified Engagement Tools	Perceived Value	Student Co-Creation Participation	University Reputation
Brand Positioning and Image Strategy	0.792					
Digital Marketing Strategy	0.658	0.844				
Gamified Engagement Tools	0.810	0.666	0.841			
Perceived Value	0.390	0.012	0.200	0.822		
Student Co-Creation Participation	0.685	0.458	0.697	0.366	0.887	
University Reputation	0.387	0.171	0.237	0.726	0.298	0.839

Source: Research result

The Fornell-Larcker criterion results confirm that each construct demonstrates satisfactory discriminant validity. This is indicated by the fact that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE)—shown along the diagonal in bold—is higher than the correlation coefficients with other constructs in the same row and column (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). For instance, the AVE square root for University Reputation (0.839) is greater than its correlations with all other constructs such as Perceived Value (0.726) and Brand Positioning (0.387). Likewise, all constructs meet this condition, suggesting that each latent variable is more strongly associated with its own indicators than with those of other constructs. These findings validate each construct's uniqueness and support the measurement model's structural integrity.

Table 4. Direct Effect Hypothesis Testing Results

Relationship	Path Coefficient	Original Sample	Standard Error	T-Statistics	P-Value
Brand Positioning and Image Strategy → Perceived Value	0.692	0.636	0.218	3.166	0.002
Brand Positioning and Image Strategy → University Reputation	0.168	0.160	0.080	2.100	0.036
Digital Marketing Strategy → Perceived Value	0.288	0.274	0.110	2.618	0.009
Digital Marketing Strategy → University Reputation	0.221	0.230	0.095	2.326	0.020
Gamified Engagement Tools → Perceived Value	0.245	0.238	0.120	2.042	0.042
Gamified Engagement Tools → University Reputation	-0.011	0.028	0.171	0.063	0.950
Perceived Value → University Reputation	0.735	0.724	0.099	7.433	0.000
Student Co-Creation Participation → Perceived Value	0.274	0.250	0.139	1.970	0.049
Student Co-Creation Participation → University Reputation	-0.075	-0.083	0.108	0.690	0.490

Source: Research result

The direct effect hypothesis testing reveals that most proposed relationships are statistically significant at the 5% level, indicated by p-values below 0.05. Notably, Brand Positioning and Image Strategy has a strong positive effect on Perceived Value ($\beta = 0.692$, p = 0.002) and a weaker yet significant effect on University Reputation (p = 0.036). Similarly, Digital Marketing Strategy significantly influences both Perceived Value (p = 0.009) and University Reputation (p = 0.020). Gamified Engagement Tools show a significant positive effect on Perceived Value (p = 0.042), but its influence on University Reputation is not significant (p = 0.950). The relationship between Student Co-Creation Participation and Perceived Value is marginally significant (p = 0.049), whereas its direct effect on University Reputation is insignificant (p = 0.490). Most importantly, Perceived Value demonstrates a strong and highly significant effect on University Reputation ($\beta = 0.735$, p = 0.000), highlighting its mediating potential in the structural model.

Table 5. Indirect Effect (Mediation) Hypothesis Testing Results

Relationship	Path Coefficient	Original Sample	Standard Error	T-Statistics	P-Value
Strategy → Perceived Value → University Reputation	0.509	0.460	0.173	2.937	0.003
Digital Marketing Strategy → Perceived Value → University Reputation	0.226	0.214	0.106	2.132	0.034
Gamified Engagement Tools → Perceived Value → University Reputation	-0.228	-0.180	0.177	1.284	0.200
Student Co-Creation Participation → Perceived Value → University Reputation	0.201	0.181	0.106	1.907	0.057

Source: Research result

The results of the indirect effect analysis indicate that Perceived Value significantly mediates the relationship between Brand Positioning and Image Strategy and University Reputation ($\beta = 0.509$, p = 0.003), as well as between Digital Marketing Strategy and University Reputation ($\beta = 0.226$, p = 0.034), confirming the presence of full or partial mediation in both paths. In contrast, the mediation effect of Perceived Value between Gamified Engagement Tools and University Reputation is not significant (p = 0.200), suggesting that this pathway lacks mediating impact. Meanwhile, the mediation effect from Student Co-Creation Participation to University Reputation via Perceived Value is marginally significant (p = 0.057), indicating a possible weak or borderline mediating relationship. These findings emphasize the critical role of perceived value in translating specific marketing innovations into enhanced institutional reputation.

Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical validation of the theoretical model that integrates innovative marketing strategies, perceived value, and university reputation within the context of higher education. Through the application of structural equation modeling using Smart PLS, the findings reveal that several marketing innovation strategies significantly influence students' perceived value and, subsequently, their perception of institutional reputation. The direct and indirect effects examined in this study offer critical insights into how

strategic marketing practices contribute to value creation and institutional branding in the eyes of students, who are among the most vital stakeholders in higher education ecosystems.

Brand positioning and image strategy emerged as the strongest predictors of perceived value, with a path coefficient of 0.692 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.002. This finding confirms the argument presented by Foroudi et al. (2019) and Eldegwy et al. (2018), who assert that institutional branding and image clarity are crucial drivers of students' evaluation of the educational service quality. When a university is perceived as distinctive, credible, and aligned with students' aspirations, it enhances their subjective assessment of the education they receive. The branding message encapsulates the university's values, culture, academic excellence, and promises, all of which contribute to the cognitive and emotional appraisal of students' educational experiences. Moreover, the significant direct effect of brand positioning on university reputation (β = 0.168, p = 0.036) reinforces the literature's assertion that brand consistency and visual identity strengthen public perception and institutional legitimacy (Balaji et al., 2016; Wilkins et al., 2016). This dual effect on both value and reputation highlights the strategic importance of well-crafted brand communication.

Similarly, the digital marketing strategy has a significant influence on both perceived value (β = 0.288, p = 0.009) and university reputation (β = 0.221, p = 0.020). This aligns with the contemporary view that digital marketing, particularly social media engagement, personalized content, and digital storytelling, plays a critical role in shaping student experiences (Peruta & Shields, 2019; Soares et al., 2021). With increasing digital nativity among students, institutions that effectively utilize digital channels to inform, engage, and personalize communications are more likely to be perceived as accessible, modern, and responsive. These perceptions directly contribute to how students appraise the utility, relevance, and desirability of the university, thereby enhancing perceived value. Furthermore, digital strategies often project a technologically competent and future-oriented image, which is positively associated with institutional reputation (EDUCAUSE, 2020; Besseah et al., 2017).

Gamified engagement tools were found to significantly affect perceived value (β = 0.245, p = 0.042) but not university reputation (β = -0.011, p = 0.950). This result suggests that while gamification techniques—such as points, badges, leaderboards, and learning simulations—can enhance the educational experience by making it more interactive and enjoyable (Sanina et al., 2020; Pöyry-Lassila et al., 2017), these tools may not be directly visible or influential enough to alter students' holistic perception of the university's reputation. This is likely because gamification operates at a micro-level, improving individual engagement with specific courses or platforms, rather than shaping students' broader perceptions of the institution. Unlike branding or digital marketing efforts, which are externally visible and convey the university's identity and prestige, gamification is typically embedded within classroom-level pedagogy and may be perceived as an initiative driven by individual instructors rather than by the institution. As such, it lacks the visibility and strategic positioning required to influence core dimensions of reputation, such as academic excellence or institutional credibility. However, the significant influence on perceived value underscores its potential in improving experiential learning outcomes and learner satisfaction.

The results also indicate that student co-creation participation has a marginally significant effect on perceived value (β = 0.274, p = 0.049) but no significant effect on university reputation (β = -0.075, p = 0.490). This partially supports findings by Bovill (2019) and Dollinger et al. (2018), who argue that engaging students in co-creation, such as curriculum development, participatory governance, and collaborative projects, can enhance their sense of ownership, agency, and satisfaction with their educational journey. The relatively weaker impact on reputation may be explained by the limited visibility of these co-creation practices beyond the internal university environment. While co-creation enriches the perceived value for involved students, it may not yet be effectively communicated or perceived externally as a hallmark of institutional excellence or innovation.

The role of perceived value as a mediating variable is one of the most critical contributions of this study. The path coefficient from perceived value to university reputation is both strong and highly significant (β = 0.735, p = 0.000), substantiating the idea that students' assessments of the value derived from their education are central to shaping institutional reputation. This finding is consistent with the theoretical assertions made by Ledden et al. (2013), Veas-Gonzalez et al. (2023), and Mateus et al. (2024), who argue that reputation is not merely a function of institutional performance or rankings, but rather a reflection of stakeholder-perceived benefits and quality. In higher education, perceived value encompasses several components, including functional benefits (career advancement), epistemic benefits (knowledge acquisition), emotional resonance (sense of pride), and social signaling (prestige), all of which converge to form reputational judgments.

The mediation analysis further reinforces the centrality of perceived value in linking marketing strategies to institutional reputation. The indirect effects of brand positioning (β = 0.509, p = 0.003) and digital marketing strategy (β = 0.226, p = 0.034) on university reputation through perceived value were both statistically significant, indicating that these strategies primarily enhance reputation by elevating students' perceived educational value. This supports the value co-creation and service-dominant logic perspectives, which posit that value is co-produced through interactions and experiences rather than embedded solely in institutional offerings (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Interestingly, the mediation path from gamified tools to university reputation via perceived value was not significant (p = 0.200), again suggesting that gamification may enhance individual engagement without necessarily altering broader reputational perceptions. Meanwhile, the mediation from co-creation to reputation via perceived value approached significance (p = 0.057), indicating a potential weak or context-dependent mediating effect that warrants further investigation.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to the literature on higher education marketing by empirically validating a multidimensional model in which perceived value serves as the pivotal mechanism through which marketing innovations influence institutional reputation. The integration of brand positioning, digital outreach, experiential tools, and participatory practices into a unified model offers a more comprehensive understanding of how modern universities can strategically manage their reputational capital. The strong mediating role of perceived value also reinforces its relevance as a central construct

in service marketing theory, particularly in contexts involving high-involvement, intangible services, such as education.

Practically, the results of this study offer valuable implications for university administrators, marketers, and policymakers. First, investments in branding and image development must go beyond visual identity and encompass value-driven messaging that aligns with students' aspirations and perceptions of quality. Second, digital marketing should be employed not only for outreach but also as a means of cultivating relationships, enhancing engagement, and conveying responsiveness. Personalized and transparent digital interactions can significantly boost both perceived value and reputation. Third, while gamified tools are effective in improving student engagement, their application should be strategically integrated with broader institutional narratives to maximize reputational impact. Lastly, co-creation should be further institutionalized and made visible to external audiences, such as prospective students and employers, to leverage its full reputational potential.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. The research was conducted within a single institutional context—Universitas Negeri Makassar—which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other higher education environments with different cultural, structural, or regulatory characteristics. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study restricts the ability to infer causal relationships over time. Longitudinal studies could further elucidate how sustained marketing innovations affect reputation development. Additionally, the use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, though this was mitigated through careful instrument design and statistical validation.

Future research could expand on this study by incorporating additional contextual variables such as institutional type (public vs. private), student demographics, or cultural dimensions that may moderate the relationships among the constructs. Comparative studies across universities or countries would also be valuable in understanding how different educational systems and cultural expectations shape the perceived value-reputation nexus. Furthermore, qualitative investigations could enrich the understanding of student perceptions, providing depth to the quantitative findings and exploring the nuances of value interpretation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that innovative marketing strategies—specifically, brand positioning and image, digital marketing, gamified engagement tools, and student co-creation participation—play a significant role in shaping students' perceived value, which in turn has a strong influence on university reputation. Among these strategies, brand positioning and digital marketing exhibit the most substantial effects, both directly and indirectly through perceived value. Perceived value acts as a crucial mediating variable, reinforcing the notion that students' evaluation of their educational experience is a key determinant of institutional reputation. While gamified engagement and co-creation initiatives enhance perceived value, their direct impact on reputation remains limited, highlighting the importance of strategic alignment and visibility. The findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to adopt student-centered, value-driven marketing strategies by aligning brand messaging with student expectations, using

digital channels to build ongoing relationships, integrating gamification within broader institutional marketing narratives, and publicly showcasing co-creation achievements to enhance visibility and foster long-term stakeholder trust.

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