



Auditing Social Media Communication Using the SOSTAC Framework to Strengthen the Brand Image of a Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

The problem and the aim of the study. The strengthening of brand image in higher education institutions has become increasingly dependent on strategic communication through digital platforms. Amid the transformation of Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA) into a state university with a legal entity (PTN-BH), the role of social media in maintaining public trust and visibility is critical. *This study aims* to evaluate the effectiveness of Instagram-based communication using the SOSTAC framework in enhancing institutional brand image.

Research methods. This study employed a qualitative descriptive method using content analysis and interviews with stakeholders in university communications. The SOSTAC (Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action, and Control) model was employed to audit Instagram content, with data triangulated through document review and observational analysis of official faculty-level Instagram accounts.

Results. The results indicate inconsistencies in visual identity, lack of structured messaging strategy, and underutilization of interactive features across faculty accounts. While engagement metrics such as likes and comments exist, alignment with strategic brand positioning remains weak. There is limited integration between central and unit-level communication teams, resulting in a fragmented university public narrative.

Conclusion. The study finds that Instagram communication in UNESA exhibits partial compliance with the SOSTAC framework. The novelty lies in the application of a marketing-based audit model in the context of higher education branding, particularly in Indonesia, providing a replicable approach for similar institutions transitioning to legal entity status. The findings underscore the importance of a centralized strategy, a consistent identity, and performance-based control mechanisms to optimize digital branding.

KEYWORDS

higher education branding, SOSTAC, Instagram audit, social media strategy, university communication

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INTRODUCTION

The challenges and opportunities facing education today are significant, particularly in the era of digital transformation. This aligns with initiatives initiated by international institutions such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the UIA (Union of International Associations). UNESCO, through its Education 2030 program, places substantial emphasis on the importance of innovation in education, particularly in the process of knowledge transfer, to ensure access, inclusivity, and quality by leveraging digital transformations such as social media [1; 2]. The Council of Europe has also strived to maximize the role of educational institutions in the process of building democratic societies through open and collaborative communication [3]. In this context, the presence of social media is considered a highly strategic aspect in the process of strengthening institutional identity and increasing stakeholder participation [4].

The phenomenon of social media as a platform for information exchange and interaction has brought about a significant transformation in digital media. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have evolved from mere communication tools into central hubs for content dissemination, community building, and audience engagement. Alaimo, Kallinikos, and Valderrama emphasize that social media platforms function as dynamic service ecosystems where users are not passive consumers but active participants in content production, networking, and social practices [5]. This aligns with the growing role of users in co-creating institutional reputations and narratives.

The widespread use of social media has also changed institutional marketing strategies, particularly in higher education. Kir notes that the migration to digital platforms represents a shift not only in tools but also in social structures and interaction models [6]. This shift is particularly pronounced in Indonesia, where, as of 2024, there are 191 million social media users – equivalent to 73.7% of the total population [7]. A majority of users are aged 18–34 (54.1%), placing university students and prospective students at the center of digital engagement. According to We Are Social, 139 million Indonesians actively use social media to search for information [8], making these platforms crucial for universities to communicate their institutional identity and educational offerings.

Social media has also become a key factor influencing prospective students' decisions. According to Sahid, students rely on Instagram and other platforms to evaluate academic programs, campus atmosphere, and testimonials from current students, thereby influencing their enrollment decisions [9]. Previous research has confirmed this trend: prospective students assess institutional credibility and culture through social media content, shaping their brand perception and emotional connection with the university [10; 11]. Moreover, social media-based branding fosters brand engagement and loyalty when strategically managed [12; 13].

Universities that effectively utilize social media for branding create a consistent digital identity across platforms. Perera et al. emphasize that brand engagement on social media directly contributes to brand equity in higher education [12], while Condie et al. highlight that personalized social media communication – such as curated Twitter strategies, can significantly enhance institutional appeal [13]. This is especially relevant in the Indonesian context, where digital-native students expect responsive, coherent, and interactive content delivery.

UNESA (Universitas Negeri Surabaya), a state university that has recently gained PTN-BH status, has acknowledged the importance of strategic branding through digital media. The university's main Instagram account (@official_unesa) has been used to highlight academic excellence, institutional milestones, and student achievements. However, there are disparities in message consistency across its faculty-level Instagram accounts, which may risk weakening its overall brand narrative. This issue is echoed by research from Capriott et al., who stress the importance of active presence and message cohesion in the social media strategies of universities worldwide [14]. Similar observations by Comai in Japanese higher education institutions point to the challenge of aligning decentralized digital content under a unified strategy [15].

In addition, studies by Shutaleva et al. [16] and Bossio [17] show that Instagram and blogs are powerful in influencing institutional image through personal branding and content curation. However, the impact of such tools depends on how strategically they are managed and aligned with institutional goals. Visual content, student experiences, and achievements must be integrated into a structured communication framework to ensure consistent storytelling and stakeholder engagement.

Despite growing interest in social media-based branding, structured evaluations using communication models, such as SOSTAC (Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action, Control), remain limited in Indonesian higher education research. Rifai et al. advocate the application of SOSTAC to assess digital marketing readiness and effectiveness [18]. Given this gap, and considering the increasing reliance on Instagram by both institutions and students, a communication audit grounded in the SOSTAC model is both timely and necessary.

Thus, this study aims to conduct a communication audit of Instagram accounts operated by UNESA and its academic units, utilizing the SOSTAC framework. The objective is to assess the alignment between institutional branding strategies, content execution, and audience engagement in order to strengthen the university's digital presence and enhance its competitive brand image in the higher education sector.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The authors employed the following methods: theoretical analysis of literature related to communication audits, digital branding in higher education, and the SOSTAC strategic communication framework, as well as qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentary studies. The conceptual basis for this research was the SOSTAC model (Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action, Control), which provides a structured approach to auditing and developing communication strategies in organizational contexts [18].

The primary research method is communication auditing, conducted within a descriptive qualitative research design. This approach allows researchers to examine communication strategies and media content in depth, particularly in how Instagram is used to reflect and promote the institutional brand of Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA). The study utilized a deductive and confirmatory framework, where findings from interviews and observations were thematically analyzed and interpreted using qualitative content analysis [19; 20].



Figure 1 SOSTAC model stages

In applying the SOSTAC model, the authors assessed six key stages: (1) Situation analysis – identification of the current communication landscape and institutional context; (2) Objectives – clarification of communication goals; (3) Strategy – formulation of long-term positioning and audience targeting; (4) Tactics – implementation tools such as Instagram features and campaign types; (5) Actions – operational steps and content execution; and (6) Control – performance monitoring and evaluation of digital presence [18].

To gather empirical data, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants who play pivotal roles in institutional branding and strategic communication. These included the Rector of UNESA, the Head of the Board of Trustees, the Chair of the Academic Senate, the Director of Public Relations and Information Services, and the Director of Cooperation. These informants were selected using purposive sampling due to their expertise and institutional responsibilities. Interview guides were constructed using the "5W + 1H" technique to ensure comprehensive insights into the branding and communication processes at UNESA. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the respondents' availability, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

In addition to interviews, non-participant observations were conducted on the management and content of Instagram accounts at both university and faculty levels. The ten accounts analyzed include: @official_unesa, @fisipol_unesa, @fbsunesa, @fipunesa, @feb.unesa, @fikkunesa, @info.ftunesa, @official_fmipaunesa, @fk.unesa, and @vokasiunesaofficial. Observation focused on the visual narrative, frequency, content themes, and stylistic consistency of each account.

The analytical framework referred to Balmer's organizational identity theory, which considers the brand image as a dynamic result of consistent communication aligned with institutional values [21]. Similar to the findings by Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., the study analyzed how content elements — text, visuals, and interactivity — contribute to users' perception of institutional legitimacy and academic reputation through Facebook-like platforms [28].

Furthermore, branding consistency was evaluated in light of Fujita et al.'s assertion that co-creating experiences on social media builds authentic relationships with students, provided that message coherence and brand personality are maintained across platforms [24]. Withanage et al. also emphasize the role of brand credibility in enhancing brand equity, highlighting the importance of centralized coordination in digital communication across institutional sub-units [25]. In this study, the evaluation assessed whether faculty-level Instagram accounts aligned with UNESA's core values and branding tone.

The study also incorporated Pawar's insights, suggesting that higher education institutions require not only a presence on social media but also a structured audit of branding content to ensure long-term strategic fit [26]. This audit included qualitative coding of posts based on strategy, message purpose, visual theme, and frequency variables identified by Mai To et al. as critical in distinguishing strong versus weak branding strategies on institutional social media accounts [27].

Thematic coding was conducted using a manual analysis process. Recurring categories included promotional vs. informational content, degree of interactivity (likes, comments, shares), and alignment with institutional mission statements. This approach enabled an integrated analysis across the six elements of the SOSTAC framework while preserving the depth of interpretation inherent in qualitative research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and higher education

In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful force in shaping the public image and communication strategies of higher education institutions. The ability to visually showcase academic excellence, student life, and institutional values has made platforms like Instagram central to university branding efforts. Apriananta and Wijaya [22] argue that social media plays a significant role in establishing a positive image for universities by providing direct access to their achievements, culture, and educational offerings. Among various platforms, Instagram has gained particular prominence due to its visual nature and widespread adoption.

Instagram, one of the fastest-growing social networking platforms globally, was initially designed to enhance the functionality of smartphone cameras for social sharing. Sheldon and Bryant [29] explain that the platform was developed to enable users to utilize their camera features more effectively by capturing and sharing photos and videos. Today, it has evolved into a multifaceted branding and engagement tool. Users can upload an unlimited number of photos and videos, with a one-minute time limit for each video. They can then enhance these videos with filters and stickers to attract viewers. This simplicity, combined with high user engagement, has made Instagram an indispensable platform not only for personal use but also for institutional communication.

In a commercial context, Instagram is widely used by businesses to market products through visual storytelling, leveraging close personal networks and viral sharing dynamics. The same principle applies to educational institutions. Indika and Jovita [30] highlight that Instagram offers mutual benefits for both institutions (as service providers) and their target audiences. Universities act as 'educational brands' offering products such as academic programs, extracurricular activities, and achievements. Instagram allows prospective students and the public to gain direct visual exposure to these 'products,' thus increasing familiarity and trust in the institution.

Ramadanty and Syafganti [23] provide further empirical support by analyzing the Instagram strategies of top Indonesian universities listed in the QS World University Rankings. Their study reveals that each institution employs a distinctive approach to content strategy tailored to its brand positioning. This highlights the strategic role of Instagram in disseminating information and differentiating institutional identity within a competitive educational landscape.

In summary, Instagram serves as a visual and interactive medium through which universities can humanize their brand, enhance public engagement, and communicate their value proposition more effectively. When used strategically, social media, particularly Instagram, can be a transformative tool for higher education institutions in building credibility, increasing visibility, and attracting prospective students.

Brand image

In the context of higher education, brand image is a crucial factor in shaping how stakeholders perceive institutions. The Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language (KBBI) defines "image" as a mental picture associated with an individual, organization, or product shaped by words, messages, or impressions. The image formed in a person's mind may vary depending on institutional conditions, media portrayals, staff performance, and official communications. As such, brand image significantly affects an institution's sustainability and competitiveness in a dynamic educational environment. It is a construct that can evolve or persist over time, and its formation can be systematically studied through empirical research.

Soemirat and Ardianto [20] assert that image is formed from accumulated knowledge and information captured cognitively by individuals. The realization of an image should be grounded in a clear conceptual foundation that aligns with institutional realities. Consistency in performance and quality forms the basis of image construction, resulting in opinions, judgments, and associations embedded in the public's mind. Their model outlines four core elements in image formation: perception, motivation, cognition, and behavior.

These elements are further detailed in the image formation model:

- Stimulus refers to any input, such as a social media post or institutional campaign, that captures the audience's attention. If the stimulus encourages deeper engagement, it has successfully fulfilled its purpose.
- Perception reflects how individuals interpret relationships or messages based on sensory and cognitive input.
- Cognition involves belief systems, concepts, and internalized interpretations that shape self-confidence in response to a stimulus.
- Behavior encompasses the tendency to act, think, and feel in specific ways toward ideas, institutions, or values.

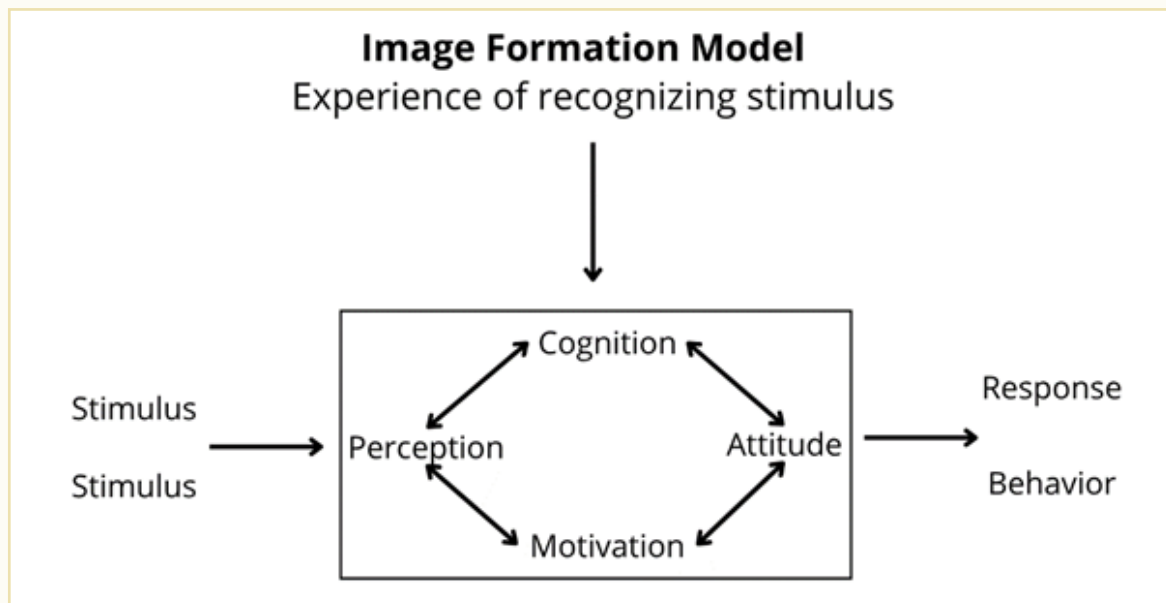


Figure 2 Image formation model

This model suggests that image construction is not instantaneous but rather an ongoing process driven by both intentional communication and individual interpretation. It begins with sensory reception, continues with internal processing using prior knowledge, and culminates in motivational and behavioral responses. Thus, image management becomes a strategic necessity for universities aiming to maximize institutional visibility while mitigating reputational risks.

Boulding (in Ardianto [19]) categorizes images into various dimensions, including spatial, emotional, individual, and rational images, each reflecting a unique perspective on how the institution is perceived in reality and imagination. Likewise, Jeffkins (in Ardianto [19]) categorizes images into:

1. Mirror Image – how internal members believe outsiders perceive the organization;
2. Current Image – the dominant view held by the public;
3. Multiple Image – diverse perceptions among different public groups;
4. Corporate Image – the holistic view of the institution as a brand;
5. Wish Image – the idealized image that the institution aspires to project.

Empirical studies reinforce the critical function of social media in shaping these image types. Anjel et al. [31] demonstrate that Instagram, as a visual communication platform, plays a pivotal role in shaping prospective students' perceptions of university credibility and campus life. Fakhri et al. [32] corroborate this by showing that strategic social media use positively influences student decisions, making institutional values and offerings more transparent and appealing. Similarly, Prihartini and Abdullah [33] identify factors such as content creation, interactive sharing, and digital community building as core mechanisms through which image is constructed and reinforced.

From an international perspective, Pasuhuk and Mandagi [34] propose that different content types and formats have measurable effects on brand perception across higher education institutions. Song et al. [35] expand on this by demonstrating how consistent engagement through social media contributes to stronger relationship quality and institutional loyalty. Capriott et al. [14] and Eger et al. [36] emphasize the importance of coherence and strategic presence across platforms in shaping global brand positioning, reinforcing the idea that brand image is deeply rooted in communication consistency. Mai To et al. [27] further suggest that mixed-method strategies involving message design and audience feedback enhance alignment between institutional identity and perceived image.

Moreover, Pringle and Fritz [37] provide evidence that social media has a significant influence on the decision-making process of postgraduate students, further validating its strategic role.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore that social media management is not merely a technical function but a core strategy for shaping, reinforcing, and evolving an institution's brand image. In the context of digital competition among universities, particularly in emerging education systems, mastering this domain offers a significant advantage in attracting and retaining students, building partnerships, and maintaining public trust.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Stakeholder perspectives on brand image: A summary of interviews

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of Universitas Negeri Surabaya's (UNESA) institutional branding through social media, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with five key stakeholders: the Rector, the Head of the Board of Trustees (MWA), the Chair of the Academic Senate, the Director of Public Relations and Information Services, and the Director of Cooperation. The interviews focused on perceptions of UNESA's current brand image, the strategic role of social media (especially Instagram), and the challenges of achieving consistency across platforms.

Table 1

Summary of interview results with UNESA key stakeholders

No.	Informant	Focus of View	Key Findings
1.	Rector	Strategic importance of branding	Instagram should reflect institutional values; current branding lacks uniformity.
2.	Head of the Board of Trustees (MWA)	Student engagement and recruitment	Social media should highlight student-centered content and inform future strategies.
3.	Chair of the Academic Senate	Academic credibility and transparency	Instagram should showcase academic programs and scientific activities more actively.
4.	Director of Public Relations and Information	Content governance and brand consistency	Faculty-level accounts operate independently; unified branding guidelines needed.
5.	Director of Cooperation	Institutional image in external partnerships	Instagram influences external trust and must appear professional and coherent.

The Rector emphasized the importance of building a digital institutional identity that reflects UNESA's transformation into a reputable state university. He noted that Instagram has become a key medium for communicating achievements and academic culture, stating that "visual storytelling is not just about aesthetics, but about narrating our values." However, he acknowledged the lack of coordination across faculty-level accounts, which often operate autonomously. The Head of MWA highlighted the relevance of student-centered content in shaping prospective students' perceptions. According to him, student engagement through social media is not only a communication goal but also a metric of institutional relevance. He suggested that social media analytics be integrated into decision-making processes related to public relations and student recruitment.

The Chair of the Senate provided an academic perspective, stressing the role of social media in fostering transparency and academic accountability. He advocated for more frequent publication of academic activities, community service projects, and scientific achievements to reinforce UNESA's credibility. The Director of Public Relations and Information Services outlined the existing digital communication strategy. He acknowledged that although the main account (@official_unesa) follows a content calendar, most faculty-level accounts lack standardized guidelines, resulting in inconsistent tone, visual identity, and message alignment. He noted, "There is a need for content governance and unified visual branding."

The Director of Cooperation emphasized the role of social media in building external partnerships. He noted that institutional stakeholders such as government agencies and foreign universities often refer to Instagram profiles for quick brand verification. Hence, the professionalism and consistency of content across all accounts are crucial in building institutional trust. Overall, the interviews revealed a shared awareness among leadership that Instagram plays a central role in branding and outreach; however, they also pointed to gaps in coordination, content planning, and evaluation mechanisms. These perspectives provide a foundation for evaluating UNESA's Instagram strategy through the SOSTAC model in the following sections.

Observational Analysis of UNESA’s Instagram Accounts

To complement the interview findings, a structured observation was conducted on ten official Instagram accounts affiliated with Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA). The accounts included: @official_unesa, @fisipol_unesa, @fbsunesa, @fipunesa, @feb.unesa, @fikkunesa, @info.ftunesa, @official_fmipaunesa, @fk.unesa, and @vokasiunesaofficial.

The observation aimed to assess the following:

- 1. the types of content posted,
- 2. the consistency of branding elements,
- 3. the alignment between posted content and UNESA’s institutional vision and mission.

Content Category Distribution

The contents were categorized into five types:

- 1. Academic announcements (e. g., seminar schedules, graduation info),
- 2. Institutional achievements (e. g., awards, accreditations),
- 3. Student activities (e. g., events, competitions),
- 4. Promotional posts (e. g., admissions, slogans),
- 5. General engagement (e. g., national holidays, greetings).

Out of approximately 300 posts analyzed across all accounts over the last six months, the distribution is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Percentage of content type

Content Type	Percentage (%)
Student Activities	32%
Academic Announcements	21%
Institutional Achievements	18%
Promotional Content	16%
General Engagement	13%

This indicates that while most accounts actively showcase student life, academic and institutional content receives less focus. This imbalance may affect how stakeholders perceive UNESA’s academic rigor and institutional excellence.

Visual and Branding Consistency

Observations revealed inconsistencies in visual branding across faculty-level accounts. While @official_unesa consistently used UNESA's logo, official color schemes, and structured layouts, several faculty accounts lacked the following:

- Standardized templates,
- Consistent typography and layout,
- Use of official hashtags or branding language.

This disparity can dilute the university's overall brand identity and reduce the recognizability of UNESA's image across platforms.

Organizational Identity Alignment

Using Balmer's framework of organizational identity, posts were analyzed for alignment with UNESA's stated values (e. g., excellence, service, innovation). It was found that:

- Only 4 out of 10 accounts regularly reflected strategic themes such as innovation and global competitiveness.
- Many posts lacked deeper narratives and focused mainly on surface-level documentation (e. g., "photo galleries" of events with minimal explanatory captions).

These observations support the interview findings, which noted a lack of content governance and strategic oversight. Without alignment with institutional values, the Instagram presence of individual faculties risks appearing fragmented and disconnected from the university's overarching goals.

Table 3

Observational summary of Instagram accounts at UNESA

No.	Instagram Account	Content Focus	Visual Branding Consistency	Alignment with UNESA's Values
1	@official_unesa	Academic info, achievements	Consistent use of logo and colors	Strong alignment (academic excellence, service)
2	@fisipol_unesa	Student activities, event promo	Partially consistent	Moderate alignment
3	@fbsunesa	Cultural events, student content	Inconsistent use of visual identity	Weak alignment (rare academic emphasis)
4	@fipunesa	Educational programs, campaigns	Relatively consistent	Moderate to strong alignment
5	@feb.unesa	Entrepreneurial content	Minimal branding elements	Moderate alignment
6	@fikkunesa	Sports activities, health promo	Consistent visuals	Limited alignment to institutional mission
7	@info.ftunesa	Lab activities, academic posts	Inconsistent layout and colors	Moderate alignment
8	@official_fmipaunesa	Science activities, competitions	Fairly consistent	Strong alignment (science, innovation)
9	@fk.unesa	Medical education promotion	Limited identity markers	Moderate alignment
10	@vokasiunesaofficial	Practical training, job fairs	Inconsistent template use	Weak to moderate alignment

The results of the observation show that the central account, @official_unesa, demonstrates the strongest level of branding and institutional narrative coherence. This account consistently utilizes official visual elements, such as the university logo, color palette, and standardized layout, while also maintaining messaging that aligns with UNESA's values, including academic excellence, innovation, and public service. In contrast, faculty-level Instagram accounts tend to focus more heavily on student-centered content, such as internal events, competitions, and extracurricular activities. While such content helps foster engagement at the faculty level, it often lacks a broader strategic framing that supports institutional goals.

A recurring issue across these faculty accounts is the inconsistency of visual identity, including irregular use of logos, non-standardized layouts, and diverse writing styles or tones. These variations indicate a lack of unified guidelines and content governance, which may dilute the overall institutional image when audiences engage with multiple UNESA-affiliated accounts. Furthermore, the alignment between posted content and UNESA's institutional values varies significantly. While some accounts (such as FMIPA and FIP) regularly include content that reflects the university's mission in science, education, and innovation, others tend to post generic or operational content with limited strategic messaging. These findings highlight the need for a more integrated and standardized approach to content management and brand consistency across all institutional social media channels.

Evaluation of UNESA's Instagram Strategy Using the SOSTAC Model

The SOSTAC model, comprising Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Action, and Control, provides a structured framework to evaluate the communication performance and branding strategy of Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA) on Instagram. The evaluation in this study integrates insights from interviews, observational findings, and institutional documentation to map out the strengths and challenges of UNESA's digital branding initiatives.

Situation Analysis

The current communication landscape indicates that UNESA's central Instagram account (@official_unesa) maintains a relatively strong digital presence characterized by consistent branding and regular content updates. However, faculty-level accounts display varied levels of activity, inconsistent visual identity, and uneven content quality. Based on observations and stakeholder interviews, there is no centralized monitoring system or standardized guideline across all accounts, which leads to the fragmented representation of the institutional brand.

The lack of integrated planning between central and faculty units results in missed opportunities for amplifying institutional achievements and values. Furthermore, although social media is widely recognized internally as an essential communication tool, its potential for strategic outreach, such as attracting partnerships and improving public perception, remains underutilized.

Objectives

The primary objectives identified from interviews include:

- Enhancing UNESA's national and international visibility,
- Communicating the university's transformation into a leading public institution,
- Increasing engagement with students and external stakeholders,
- Unifying brand representation across digital platforms.

However, these objectives are not formally codified into a digital communication blueprint that is shared institution-wide. This absence of measurable and time-bound targets reduces the effectiveness of current branding efforts.

Strategy

At the strategy level, UNESA’s approach is partially centralized. The primary account follows a pre-planned content calendar focused on academic achievements and promotional posts. However, faculty-level accounts operate semi-independently with limited coordination. This leads to diverse styles and disconnected narratives across different units. The lack of a university-wide digital branding playbook hinders the development of a cohesive storytelling strategy that resonates institutionally and externally.

Tactics

The tactics currently employed include:

- Posting event documentation and infographics,
- Sharing institutional milestones and student achievements,
- Utilizing hashtags and tagging other accounts,
- Occasionally using Instagram Stories and Reels.

While these tactics are functional, they lack segmentation and personalization. Targeted tactics based on audience analysis, such as tailored content for prospective students, alums, or international audiences, are not systematically implemented. The use of Instagram’s complete feature set remains limited.

Action

The action phase, which involves implementation, varies significantly across units. The primary account has a small but dedicated team that manages posting and engagement. In contrast, many faculty accounts are managed on an ad-hoc basis, often by administrative staff or student volunteers without formal training in digital communication. This contributes to the uneven quality and frequency of content across platforms. Moreover, there is no formal capacity-building program to train content managers on branding, visual identity, or engagement strategies. As a result, execution remains inconsistent despite good intentions and awareness at the leadership level.

Control

The control component, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback, is the weakest link in the current system. Based on interview responses, there is no structured evaluation framework in place to assess performance metrics, such as reach, engagement rate, or audience sentiment. Data from Instagram analytics is rarely compiled into reports or used for strategic refinement. Without regular audits or performance reviews, it becomes difficult to track progress toward institutional branding goals. The absence of control mechanisms also makes it hard to ensure content alignment across accounts or to replicate best practices internally.

Table 4

Summary of UNESA’s Instagram evaluation based on the SOSTAC model

SOSTAC Component	Evaluation Focus	Findings at UNESA
Situation	Current condition, internal environment, social media use	Strong branding on @official_unesa, but inconsistency and fragmentation across faculty-level accounts; no centralized monitoring or guideline.

Objectives	Communication goals, KPIs	General goals recognized (branding, visibility, engagement), but not formally documented or translated into measurable and time-bound indicators.
Strategy	Overall approach to content and branding	Semi-centralized strategy; main account is planned, but faculty accounts lack coordination, resulting in mixed tone and institutional narrative.
Tactics	Channels, content type, communication techniques	Reliance on standard posting (event photos, achievements); limited use of Instagram Stories/Reels; no audience segmentation or tailored messaging.
Action	Implementation, human resources	Execution varies widely; main account handled by PR unit, while many faculty accounts are run informally by untrained staff or students; inconsistent posting.
Control	Monitoring, analytics, feedback loops	No regular reporting or data analysis; lack of structured performance review; engagement metrics not systematically tracked or used for improvement.

The application of the SOSTAC model reveals that while UNESA has taken important initial steps in utilizing Instagram for institutional branding, primarily through its central account, significant gaps remain in coordination, strategic planning, and performance monitoring. To enhance its overall branding impact, UNESA must formalize its objectives, establish consistent strategies across all units, and develop mechanisms for evaluation and quality control.

DISCUSSION

UNESA, also known as Surabaya State University, is a State University located in Surabaya, East Java. UNESA was founded on December 19, 1964, previously known as IKIP Surabaya. UNESA buildings are divided into 5, including 1) Ketintang Campus – Surabaya; 2) Lidah Wetan Campus-Surabaya; 3) I Confucius Institute UNESA – Surabaya; 4) Gedangan Campus; and 5) Magetan Campus. UNESA has 10 Faculties, including 1) the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, 2) the Faculty of Economics and Business, 3) the Faculty of Engineering, 4) the Faculty of Education, 5) the Faculty of Medicine, 6) the Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences, 7) Faculty of Vocational Studies and 8) Faculty of Languages and Arts; and 9) Faculty of Law; 10) Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Education. In addition, UNESA offers two programs: the Teacher Professional Education Program and the Prior Learning Recognition Program. Currently, UNESA offers 134 study programs comprising applied undergraduate, undergraduate, and postgraduate degrees.

UNESA is a higher education institution that emphasizes the spirit of education through its curriculum and learning programs, which are designed for students. Based on Presidential Decree No. 93 of 1999, IKIP Surabaya changed to Surabaya State University. UNESA is an institution with a dual mission that retains its roots as an LPTK (Education Personnel Training Institution). UNESA continues to fulfill its primary mission, which is to organize educational and non-educational programs, thereby maintaining its role as a producer of educational personnel for preschool, elementary, and secondary education. This history is supported by the statement of Prof. Dr. H. Haris Supratno, Chairperson of the UNESA Board of Trustees (MWA) for the 2022-2027 period, who states that UNESA is a university with an educational spirit. This means that all academic activities at UNESA, including the curriculum prepared and the graduates produced, will reflect the role of education.

"Our identity remains an educational university. The characteristics of education should not be forgotten, as they are one of the requirements for IKIP Negeri to become a University. Well, that is the key act that the younger generation must know... unesa educational campus has its history, its asbabun nuzul. In the context of our education study program, our teaching methods, curriculum, and competencies are designed to help students understand the significance of education. So, it is not just about being a teacher but about teaching and providing understanding; that is the meaning of education, which is the spirit. Origin. Asbabun nuzul from unesa" - Prof. Dr. H. Haris Supratno, Chairman of the Unesa MWA for the 2022-2027 Period.

After changing its status from IKIP to PTN-BLU and currently to PTN-BH, UNESA continues to maintain its existence as a state university with an educational spirit. As a step to maintain its existence among the many competing universities and to remain relevant amidst the increasingly tight competition between higher education institutions, UNESA positions itself as an institution that

excels in the fields of sports, arts, and services for people with disabilities. Through this emphasis, UNESA utilizes competitive advantages that distinguish it from other educational institutions. By consolidating and developing superior programs in these three fields, UNESA strengthens its identity as an institution that offers more advantages, particularly in academics and the holistic development of its students' potential. Thus, UNESA is not only an academic destination but also a place where individual talents and needs are valued and considered comprehensively, strengthening its strategic role in society and the world of education. With the motto "One Step Ahead," UNESA presents itself as an institution that continually moves forward and innovates. Through a sophisticated and integrated digital platform, UNESA enhances its reputation as a high-achieving and future-oriented educational center. The Rector of Unesa emphasized this mission for the 2023-2027 period, Prof. Dr. Nurhasan, M. Kes, through an interview in (April 2024).

"The big umbrella is UNESA one step ahead, well in it there are those advantages.... Therefore, UNESA must be able to have adaptive branding in this era. What is trending is that we collaborate with the competencies that UNESA has, including the achievements of students, lecturers, and education staff, as well as universities. So we can be adaptive without losing the dignity of the university". Rector of Unesa, Prof. Dr. Nurhasan, M.Kes

UNESA has designed a digital branding strategy as a step towards establishing an institution that is aligned with modern technology and mass media. The audit results in this study found that UNESA has implemented the work procedures it has determined in the brand image process it is carrying out. The procedure is arranged in a long-term program and adjusts to the current needs of their institution, including 1) planning and setting goals and targets that UNESA wants to achieve in each planned program, 2) identifying and analyzing obstacles and supporters in each planned program, 3) organizing, UNESA determines the implementing team in each specific program, according to the needs of each brand image program created on social media, 4) controlling, in the form of developing and adjusting programs or content according to the needs of the brand image needed (Vinda Maya Setianingrum, S.Sos., MA,, Director of Public Relations and Public Information Disclosure Unesa in an interview on April 11, 2024).

One of the social media platforms used by UNESA to implement its institution's brand image is Instagram, with the account name @official_unesa. Then each faculty also has its official account, including 1) the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, with the Instagram account name @fisipol_unesa; 2) the Faculty of Language and Arts, with the Instagram account name @fbsunesa; 3) the Faculty of Education, with the Instagram account name @fipunesa; 4) Faculty of Education with the Instagram account name @fipunesa, 5) Faculty of Economics and Business with the Instagram account name @feb.unesa; 6) Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences with the Instagram account name @fikkunesa; 7) Faculty of Engineering Unesa with the Instagram account name @info.ftunesa; 8) Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Education with the Instagram account name @official_fmipaunesa; 9) Faculty of Medicine with the account name @fk.unesa; 10) Faculty of Vocational Studies with the Instagram account name @vokasiunesaofficial.

Instagram has become an effective social media platform used by the UNESA Public Relations and Public Information Service Directorate as a promotional and informational medium for audiences, including academics, prospective students, and the general public. Here are some reasons why Instagram is the choice for UNESA to carry out college branding:

1. Technological developments require UNESA to prioritize communication as an essential part of its needs, and Instagram social media enables the reach of targets quickly, precisely, and effectively.
2. Based on social media analytics data, Instagram is the most effective social media platform for promoting UNESA's brand image compared to other platforms.
3. Instagram users have an age range that matches UNESA's branding target market, specifically high school students as prospective registrants and current UNESA campus students.
4. Instagram is an image and video-based platform, which makes it very effective for displaying college activities. Through high-quality photos and engaging videos, UNESA Public Relations can capture the audience's attention more quickly and effectively.
5. Instagram allows two-way interaction between UNESA and its audience. Through the comments, direct messages, and Instagram stories features, the audience can interact directly with UNESA Public Relations, provide feedback, ask questions, or share experiences. This

strengthens the relationship between UNESA and its audience, increasing their involvement in the content presented.

6. Instagram provides various features for sharing content, including posting images, videos, stories, IGTV, and live streaming. This provides flexibility for UNESA Public Relations to present information in a manner that is both polite and engaging, tailored to the audience's preferences and interests.

By utilizing these advantages, UNESA Public Relations can build a strong and positive presence on Instagram, and make it an effective tool to promote the university, convey information and interact with its audience directly. The alignment of content on social media accounts between faculties and universities certainly needs to be considered in building UNESA's brand image. In the observation of UNESA's Instagram social media account (@official_unesa) with the Instagram accounts of UNESA's surrounding faculties, it is presented in the following image:

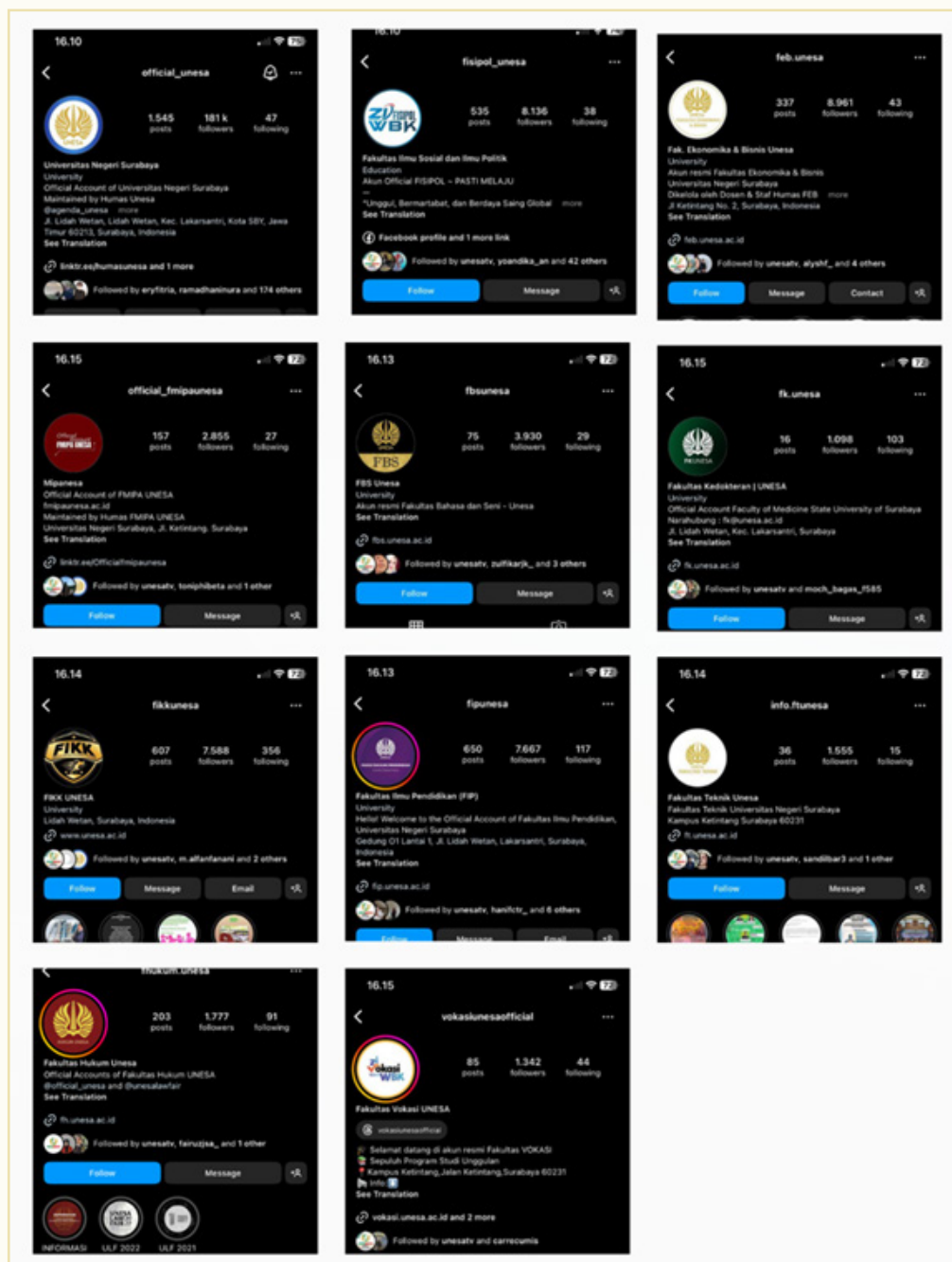


Figure 3 UNESA Instagram social media accounts and UNESA faculties

Based on the observation results, it was found that the faculty's Instagram account exhibited egocentrism, often uploading content about the faculty without highlighting the university's advantages or identity. The lack of integration of accounts between faculties was then identified by researchers as follows:

1. The social media bio does not include the official university account, despite the official account link potentially affecting the webometric assessment. Of the 10 faculties, only one faculty, namely the Faculty of Law, includes @official_unesa as the parent account or main account of UNESA.
2. The use of profile photos that are not compact can lead to the impression that the account is not an official one. Upon examining the UNESA university account, we find that the profile picture features the institution's logo. Similarly, on the faculty account, 6 out of 10 faculties use the same profile photo, namely the institution's logo, while the other 3 use different identities.
3. Similar to profile photos, the use of different usernames, especially those that have not been verified, can significantly impact the authenticity of the account.
4. Finally, the content that is published. @official_unesa routinely publishes university activities and products, in contrast to faculty accounts that do not routinely publish activities. Even one of the accounts was identified as having last uploaded content on March 21, 2024.
5. No content is educational and superior in the fields of art and culture.

This study also found that the combination of faculty and college Instagram positioning strategies plays a significant role in developing the brand image of Surabaya State University. Therefore, there needs to be a distinctive and interrelated characteristic between college and faculty accounts. This positioning step can then facilitate the creation of an institution's digital strategy and is also a key concern in this positioning, ensuring that the goals of college and faculty accounts remain aligned and have a consistent relationship. So that the information needs and image construction formed in the minds of the audience between faculties have a similar depiction.

As a step to assess the effectiveness of the brand image at Surabaya State University, the researcher conducted this communication audit by conducting in-depth interviews with UNESA leaders who hold important roles as decision-makers related to UNESA policies and image. This communication audit was then processed using the SOSTAC method, namely observations from Situation Analysis, Objective, Strategy, Tactic, Action, and Control as follows:

1. Situation Analysis

This situation analysis is based on audit findings, which utilized in-depth interview methods with the Head of Public Relations and Public Services at Unesa, as well as literature studies. It was found that in 2024, Surabaya State University successfully entered the Webometrics Ranking. Webometric is an organization that ranks universities worldwide, a process that has been carried out since July 2012. Based on the Webometrics ranking data of universities, Unesa is in the 24th best position among state universities throughout Indonesia. Of the total 3567 universities in Indonesia, including Private Universities, that are included in the ranking list (webometrics.info: 2024).

Nevertheless, the brand image of the institution as an educational campus built by UNESA still needs to be continually innovated, as there are also several competitors. Moreover, the public image, based on the content published by the university's account, tends to emphasize sports more than other advantages and characteristics of UNESA as an educational institution. Moreover, when viewing the relationship between the content of Instagram publications between the official university account and the faculty account, several shortcomings were identified, including:

- a. Faculty accounts still tend to be egocentric. Reviewing the interview results, it is evident that UNESA has a strong educational spirit. All study programs, curricula, and student activities must represent the concept of education. Through this statement, it is essential to incorporate educational concepts into every Instagram content upload. This can be achieved through educational uploads or

by informing the role of education in the curriculum for each faculty. So that Unesa's digital image as an educational campus does not fade. However, inter-faculty Instagram accounts still tend to promote the characteristics of their respective faculties. Most of them do not have a promotional agenda or an image to build; they only actively publish information. There is no brand image built on their Instagram accounts. Meanwhile, the Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences account (@fikkunesa) tends to excel in promoting their achievements and activities. The image they create is that of a superior college in the field of sports.

b. There is no publication relationship between @official_unesa content and other faculty Instagram accounts. When comparing the @official_unesa college account, which has a clear direction for promotion and activation, with inter-faculty accounts regarding promotion strategies and information, it becomes apparent that the publication timeline for specific topics is uneven. For example, when the @official_unesa account publishes regarding the technicalities of new student registration via the independent pathway in general, other faculty accounts should explain a detailed version regarding the technicalities of new student registration at their faculty, especially at FIKK and FBS, which have other requirements for accepting new students, namely the obligation to attach a portfolio. In reality, the Instagram account of the Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences did not publish any information related to new student admissions. The Instagram account of the Faculty of Languages and Arts was identified as publishing promotions for new student admissions. However, it did not specifically explain the details that prospective new students must provide.



Figure 4 @official UNESA content about new student admissions

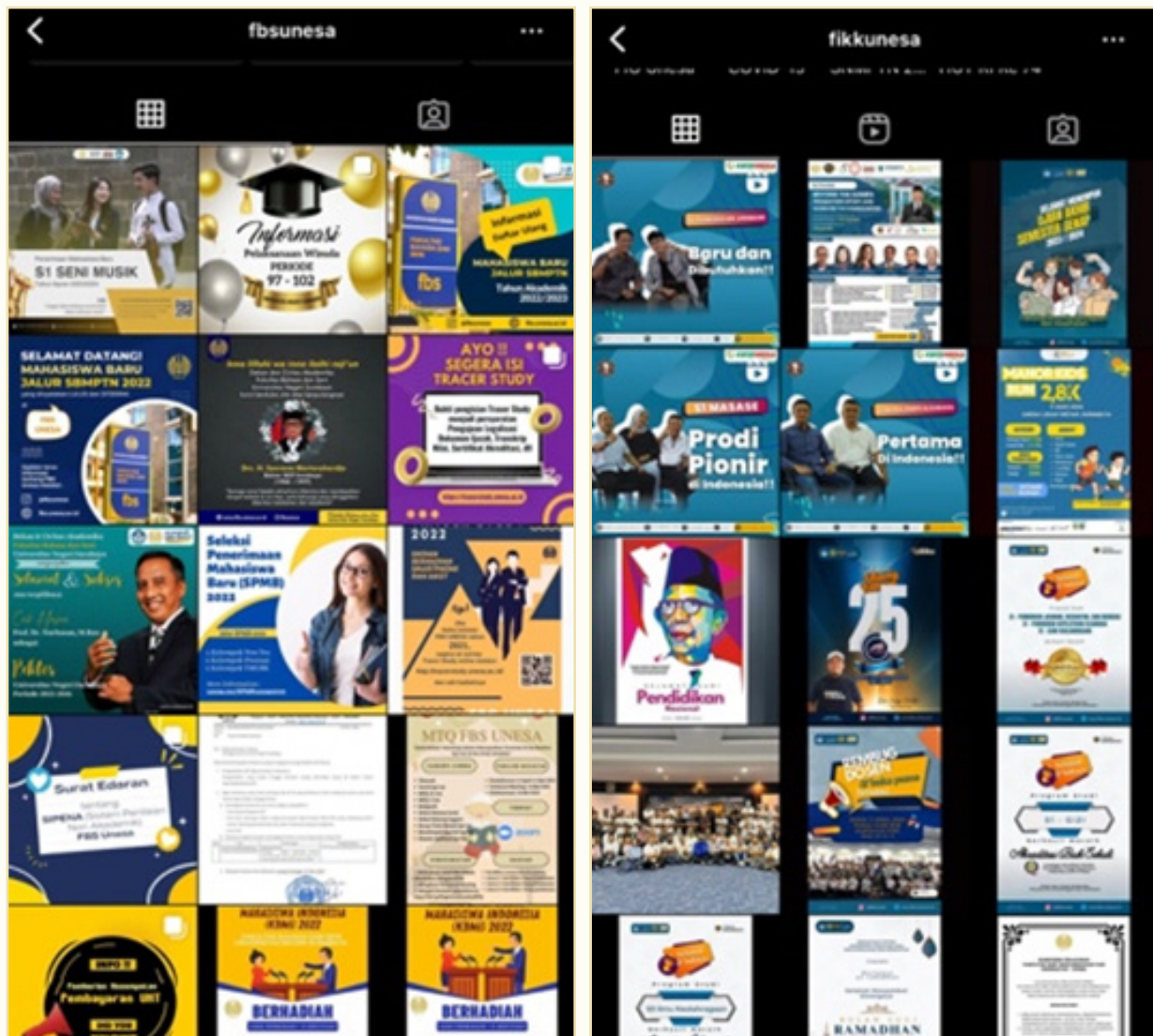


Figure 5 Uploads from @fbsunesa and @fikkunesa accounts

c. There is no role for public relations account officers for faculty groups. Based on the problems that occurred, an interview with the Director of Public Relations and Public Information revealed that promotional activities and information dissemination were not yet coherent between university accounts and faculties due to the absence of a strategic plan for digital activities involving faculty public relations groups. Therefore, promotional and information posts are unrelated.

This is the real challenge faced in strengthening UNESA's brand image to compete with other universities in attracting new students to choose UNESA. This competition does not only occur at the national level, but many universities in Surabaya City are also currently utilizing their brand image as a marketing tool for their educational campuses.

2. Objective

Based on the results of the interview with the Rector of UNESA (Prof. Dr. Nurhasan, M. Kes), the benchmark for the success of branding carried out at UNESA is the increase in new student registration and the achievement of superior webometric rankings. To achieve superior webometric rankings, the involvement of the entire academic community is needed in building or representing the UNESA brand in the digital realm. This can be realized by 1) Linking the official university account; 2) Using the acronym (State University of Surabaya - UNESA) in every similar digital activity so that organic keywords will be formed; and 3) Between publications and digital activities grow organically simultaneously.

In addition to increasing the webometric ranking, the ultimate goal of building this digital image is to attract the interest and attraction of new students. Judging from the digital activities of Indonesian society, the youth group is the largest and most active user of digital media. Therefore, to create a digital impression/ or brand awareness of UNESA as a superior university, it is necessary to provide differentiation in each of its digital activities. Highlighting the dignity of the university as an educational institution and the excellence of the university in the fields of Sports, Arts, and Disability Services. This positioning must be actively published and introduced on the university account and inter-faculty accounts around UNESA to build a solid brand image among digital audiences.

3. Strategy

After identifying the identity of the university and the advantages of higher education, in order to build a brand image in the digital audience, it is necessary to realize the Organizational Positioning Strategy as a way to design a branding strategy to create a unique positive difference in UNESA so that it is remembered in the public mind. The relationship between faculty and university accounts plays a crucial role in meeting the diverse information needs of various audiences. To develop an efficient and effective strategy for distributing information and promotion in the digital realm, the Directorate of Public Relations and Public Information must collaborate with institutions within the faculty to produce interrelated content.

Integration between faculty and university Instagram accounts is essential because, in webometrics ranking activities, specific keywords are used to calculate the relationship between accounts. Content integration is carried out to ensure consistency in the actual information about the institution across different followers on each account. So, involving faculty groups in building a digital ecosystem for higher education will make it easier and expand the reach of the audience. This will undoubtedly make it easier for the Directorate of Public Relations and Public Information to share the information provided, thereby improving the Webometric ranking and increasing the interest of digital audiences.

4. Tactics

After determining the strategy for UNESA's brand image, the next stage is to implement the tactics. UNESA's tactics in branding its institution on social media are by promoting managed content. However, at this stage, there has been no integration between the university and faculty Instagram accounts. This is a note that requires improvement by the Public Relations Team. Not only does social media management need integration, but the products published also need to have a linear concept and context. This aims to provide ease of understanding for digital audiences to identify that accounts between faculties are interrelated and are official accounts of the university. Here are some recommended tactics that can be used in building a coherent brand image between the university account @official_unesa and accounts between faculties: 1) Use of the same account name; 2) use of identity colors that represent the faculties; 3) Use of the same visual nuances; and 4) mentions and links that are interrelated with each other.

5. Actions

Researchers found several actions taken by branding institutions on social media, including (1) content strategy, which involves providing interactive information, and (2) social media design, which involves creating content with visually appealing elements. This certainly requires collaboration, first by identifying Public Relations and Public Service Information, as well as Instagram account managers, across faculties so that managers share the same brand image concept.

6. Control

To measure the effectiveness of the brand image, UNESA conducts periodic evaluations of the content published on social media platforms. This evaluation is now made easier with social media technology that can provide data analysis on the demographics of each uploaded content, making it easier to segment targets.

The findings of this study highlight that although Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA) actively utilizes Instagram through its central account (@official_unesa), there is a notable fragmentation in the digital representation of the institution when compared across faculty-level accounts. Differences in visual identity, such as logo positioning, color palettes, and post formatting, alongside variances in

tone and narrative structure, create an uneven institutional image. These inconsistencies challenge the effectiveness of branding efforts and hinder the creation of a unified and credible identity in the eyes of prospective students, partners, and the general public [38]. As social media increasingly becomes the primary point of contact between universities and external stakeholders, the absence of a coherent brand storytelling strategy may reduce the persuasive impact of digital engagement strategies.

The strong emphasis on student-centered content, such as student activities, competitions, and campus life, while valuable for increasing relatability and fostering emotional connections, often overshadows more strategic institutional narratives. This pattern is observable not only at UNESA but also in various higher education institutions where branding efforts become localized and overly focused on student culture without a clear linkage to institutional goals, values, and vision [39]. Although this approach generates organic engagement, it may inadvertently obscure the core identity that the university aims to convey, especially to non-student audiences such as parents, alums, or international partners [40]. Branding in higher education should strike a balance between authentically portraying the student experience and projecting organizational values and academic excellence.

This study affirms the strategic importance of content planning, coherence, and visual storytelling in social media management. A strong digital brand does not emerge solely from frequent posts but from intentional and coordinated messaging that consistently reflects the institution's identity across all units. Curation of image themes, video formats, caption language, and hashtags should align with broader communication objectives to maintain trust and brand clarity [41]. In this regard, content formats such as behind-the-scenes videos, testimonials, or faculty spotlights that showcase value-laden narratives rather than generic event promotions tend to establish deeper emotional resonance and longer viewer retention [42]. Universities must, therefore, move from reactive content posting to strategic content orchestration, mainly when operating in a multi-account ecosystem like UNESA.

Another pressing issue is the underutilization of dialogic and interactive features on social media. Content published by institutional accounts is mainly informative and unidirectional, lacking the conversational tone or interactive tools that foster two-way communication. Features like polls, Q&A boxes, and comment engagement are potent tools that can create a sense of belonging and community among followers [43; 44]. Unfortunately, most faculty accounts do not utilize these features optimally, nor do they monitor interaction quality indicators, such as comment sentiment, post shares, or audience retention, despite their relevance in understanding audience preferences and content performance [45; 46]. These metrics could serve as invaluable feedback loops for improving future campaign design and message targeting.

The absence of centralized content governance across the UNESA Instagram ecosystem presents risks to institutional credibility. Without guidelines, user-generated content (UGC), including student posts tagged to official accounts, may be reshared without quality control or narrative alignment. This opens opportunities for brand misrepresentation or off-brand messaging that confuses audiences about the institution's identity [47]. Institutions must thus establish policies and editorial standards that address content approval workflows, brand voice consistency, and escalation procedures for managing reputational risks. The inclusion of faculty media managers or digital brand ambassadors could be a practical step to ensure that decentralized content still aligns with institutional guidelines.

This study also confirms the relevance and applicability of the SOSTAC model in auditing the performance of social media branding strategies in higher education. Through its structured approach, starting from situation analysis to evaluation and control, the model provides a diagnostic framework for identifying misalignments and optimizing institutional communication [48]. More than just a planning tool, SOSTAC helps uncover gaps between intention and execution, particularly when used in conjunction with qualitative data from interviews and content audits. Furthermore, digital branding in the academic context is not merely about deploying technology but about conveying meaning, identity, and trustworthiness. The ability to communicate ethos, mission, and culture through visual and narrative consistency is what defines a strong institutional presence [49].

While this research contributes critical insight into Instagram-based institutional branding, its scope is limited in two significant ways: first, by its exclusive focus on Instagram without incorporating other social platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, or YouTube, and second, by its emphasis on content structure over user engagement analytics such as sentiment tracking or follower growth. Future studies are encouraged to explore how design principles such as layout harmony,

font usage, and post-timing affect perception and memory retention. A comparative analysis of centralized versus decentralized social media governance within higher education institutions would also add value, particularly in understanding which model offers better scalability, message control, and audience connection in a competitive digital environment.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that the strategic use of digital publication media, particularly Instagram, can significantly enhance the institutional brand image in higher education. The presence of a centralized platform, such as @official_unesa, enables the broader dissemination of institutional narratives and promotional content. However, inconsistencies in content and branding across faculty-level accounts reduce the effectiveness of the university's overall communication strategy. This highlights the necessity of coordinated digital branding initiatives across all academic units. The application of an organizational positioning strategy emphasizing UNESA's excellence in arts, sports, and disability inclusion serves as a unique differentiating factor. When integrated into content planning, this strategic focus can enhance the authenticity and relevance of promotional content, enabling UNESA to stand out in a competitive educational environment. The findings also demonstrate the importance of aligning visual identity, messaging tone, and content structure to foster a unified brand perception among prospective students, partners, and the general public. In conclusion, the SOSTAC model has proven effective in evaluating and structuring institutional communication practices on social media. Its implementation facilitates the identification of key strategic gaps and supports the formulation of actionable improvements in content planning and execution. The study recommends establishing an integrated communication ecosystem involving both central and faculty-level social media managers to ensure consistency and maximize branding outcomes.

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