

SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIVENESS AND INSTITUTIONAL REPUTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AZERBAIJAN: DOES THE TYPE OF RESPONSE MATTER?

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Abstract

The primary aim of the research is to explore the mediating role social media responsiveness plays in relationship between SMM and institutional reputation in higher education institutions of Azerbaijan. Specifically, the study examines whether public engagement strategy and digital trust serve as sequential mediating mechanisms. Method The research was based on a quasi-experimental design via an online survey among 412 public and private university students in Azerbaijan (cross-sectional). The data were analyzed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with 5000 bootstrap resamples. Findings of the study reveal that social media responsiveness is not shown to have significant direct influence on institutional reputation. Nevertheless, a complete serial mediating effect was found for the following: social media responsiveness indirectly influence on CR through improvements in public engagement strategies (PES) and subsequently increasing digital trust ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$). The model accounts for 58% of the variance in institution reputation. The findings have practical implications: namely, that universities ought not place all of their social media eggs in the basket of speed of response, but instead train staff to engage in authentic dialogue, show empathy and resolve issues effectively on social media. The originality of the study lies in that it extends Dynamic Capabilities Theory to Dialogic Public Relations cues, and points out digital trust as a critical serial mediator in an emerging countries context.

Keywords: *social media responsiveness, public engagement strategy, digital trust, institutional reputation, higher education.*

JEL Classification: *M31; I23; L82.*

AZƏRBAYCANDA ALİ TƏHSİLDƏ SOSIAL MEDIALARIN CAVABI VƏ İNSTITUSIONAL REPUTASIYA: CAVABIN NÖVÜ ƏHƏMIYYƏTLİDİRMİ?

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Xülasə

Tədqiqatın əsas məqsədi Azərbaycanda ali təhsil müəssisələri kontekstində sosial media cavablılığının institusional reputasiyaya təsir mexanizmini müəyyən etməkdir. Xüsusilə bu təsirin ictimai cəlbətmə strategiyası və rəqəmsal etibar vasitəsilə ardıcıl vasitəçilik modeli əsasında formalaşmış-formalaşmadığı araşdırılır. Tədqiqat kəmiyyət yanaşmasına əsaslanaraq, kəsikvari dizaynla həyata keçirilmiş və ölkənin dövlət və özəl universitetlərində təhsil alan 412 tələbə arasında onlayn sorğu aparılmışdır. Tədqiqat məlumatları Qismən Ən Kiçik Kvadratlar Struktur Tənlik Modelləşdirməsi (PLS-SEM) metodu ilə, 5.000 bootstrap nümunəsi əsasında təhlil edilmişdir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, sosial media cavablılığının institusional reputasiyaya birbaşa təsiri statistik baxımdan əhəmiyyətli deyildir. Bununla belə, sosial media cavablılığının ictimai cəlbətmə strategiyası və sonradan rəqəmsal etibar vasitəsilə institusional reputasiyaya dolaylı təsir göstərdiyini təsdiqləyən tam ardıcıl vasitəçilik effekti müəyyən edilmişdir ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$). Model institusional reputasiyadakı variasiyanın 58%-ni izah edir. Tədqiqatın praktik əhəmiyyəti ali təhsil müəssisələrinin sosial mediada cavab sürətindən daha çox dialoq, empatiya və problemlərin effektiv həllinə əsaslanan qarşılıqlı əlaqələri inkişaf etdirməsinin vacibliyini vurğulamasıdır. Elmi yenilik isə inkişaf etməkdə olan ölkə kontekstində rəqəmsal etibarın əsas ardıcıl vasitəçi rolunun əsaslandırılmasıdır.

Açar sözlər: sosial media cavablılığı, ictimai cəlbətmə strategiyası, rəqəmsal etibar, institusional reputasiya, ali təhsil.

ОПЕРАТИВНОСТЬ В СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЯХ И ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ РЕПУТАЦИЯ В СИСТЕМЕ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА: ИМЕЕТ ЛИ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ ТИП ОТВЕТА?

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Резюме

В данной статье исследуется вопрос о том, как скорость реакции в социальных медиа определяет институциональную репутацию университетов Азербайджана. В центре внимания автора находится проверка гипотезы о последовательной медиации, где связующими звеньями выступают коммуникационная стратегия и цифровое доверие.

Эмпирическую базу работы составили результаты онлайн-опроса, охватившего 412 студентов из государственного и частного секторов высшего образования республики. Обработка собранных данных проводилась методом моделирования структурными уравнениями (PLS-SEM). Для верификации статистической устойчивости полученных коэффициентов использовалась процедура бутстрэппинга (5 000 итераций).

В ходе анализа было установлено, что сама по себе оперативность ответов в соцсетях не имеет прямого статистически значимого влияния на репутацию вуза. Однако обнаружен эффект полной последовательной медиации. Это доказывает, что фактор скорости работает на репутацию лишь опосредованно: через выстраивание качественного взаимодействия и последующее укрепление цифрового доверия. В целом разработанная модель объясняет вариации репутационного показателя.

Научная новизна исследования подтверждает, что в условиях развивающегося рынка Азербайджана именно цифровое доверие является фундаментальным активом. Практическая значимость работы заключается в рекомендации для вузов: необходимо смещать приоритеты с чисто технических параметров (времени ответа) на содержательную сторону общения. Эмпатия и реальная помощь пользователю в цифровом пространстве оказываются гораздо эффективнее для имиджа, чем формальная быстрота реакции.

***Ключевые слова:** социальные сети, оперативность коммуникаций, цифровое доверие, репутация вуза, высшее образование.*

Introduction

The accelerated rise of social media has transformed the way we communicate in today's age, and as such has become increasingly essential for higher education institutions (HEIs) all over the world. Today, social media has moved far beyond just advertising to being an essential foundation of student engagement, conversation and relationship building—especially for a young, very interactive audience like students. Within this environment, it is generally believed that one aspect of

stewardship – social media responsiveness (SMR) or the prompt and effective management of institutional responses to stakeholder interactions – can act as a buffer in promoting IR. But, the processes how SMR leads to Reputation Outcomes are still underresearched and are even less known in developing-country contexts like Azerbaijan (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Peruta & Shields, 2017; Pawar, 2024).

Strategic reforms in higher education are currently underway in Azerbaijan, aiming to bring about a more systematic alignment with global tendencies in academia. In a highly competitive HE landscape and given the export element, the marketing approach of Azerbaijani HEIs is attentive to all contemporary trends of digital interaction and 'real-time' communication as a bridge for recruiting prospective students, enhancing legitimacy, and gaining stakeholder trust. But success probably isn't just a matter of having an online presence or responding promptly. Indeed, new research shows that the qualitative dimensions of engagement— dialogic interaction, stakeholder-responsive, and supportive communication—may affect perception and trust even more so than speed (see Clase & Ainspan, 2014). Thus, IR may not be directly influenced by responsiveness to patients so much as it is indirectly molded by strategic engagement processes and the trust they generate.

In this context, to fill a significant gap in the literature, we study the association of SMR and IR -in Azerbaijani higher education- and question whether both PES and digital trust (DT), as first and second-order mediators, function as conditional-mediating mechanisms. Adopting a serial mediation model allows the analysis to bypass linear cause-effect interpretations into how responsiveness forms engagement strategies, and these strategies foster dynamic ties (DT) through which DT ultimately impacts reputation. It also investigates whether response quality-interactive, empathetic, and problem focused communication-practices is crucial for the process.

Main study aims The main aim for the study is to test empirically a serial mediation model where SMR acts as musician-input on IR through its effects via PES and DT. In theoretical terms, this work builds on Dynamic Capabilities Theory and Dialogic Public Relations Theory in a developing country setting. In practical terms, this study provides a game plan for Azerbaijani HEIs: it highlights that the road to positive reputation is through meaningful responsiveness and trust-building, rather than mere response speed (Clark et al., 2017; Eger et al., 2021Marings & Gmür, 2024Stoica et al.

Materials and Methods

In the context of higher education in Azerbaijan, this study utilized a quantitative study design by utilizing an online cross-sectional survey to analyze the link between social media responsiveness (SMR), public engagement strategy (PES), digital trust (DT), and institution reputation. This research adopted a survey-based approach to capture perceptual and attitudinal data from a large sample and test complex relational models consisting of multiple latent constructs.

The study population was private and public higher education students in all over Azerbaijan. Given that students constitute one of the most active and directly engaging stakeholder groups on universities' social media, we select students as our focal unit of analysis. Online data collection was used to allow for wide geographic representation and participation across organizations. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the design, we could only establish associations between study variables at one point in time, as with previous research investigating social media and higher education communication studies (Wilson et al., 2015).

Research Design and Sample

This research applied a quantitative, cross-sectional survey approach to explore the correlations between social media responsiveness (SMR), public engagement strategy (PES), digital trust (DT) and institutional reputation (IR) in Azerbaijan's HE sector. A cross-sectional study is suitable as it was able to analyze associations among variables at one point in time, and is commonly used with social media and higher education research.

The study population was the students of public and private universities in all cities of Azerbaijan who use social media for their interaction with their university. Due to its exploratory–explanatory nature, the study sample was collected online within a convenience sampling framework. While it does affect generalizability, this approach is appropriate for hypothesis testing and model validation in research in behavior and communication. The final sample was composed of 412 students: 59.2% women (n = 244) and 40.8% men (n = 168). Undergraduates made up 79.4% (n = 327) of the sample and postgraduate students (Master's/PhD) 20.6% (n = 85). Instagram was the most commonly cited primary platform (57.8%, n = 238) followed by Facebook (25.1%, n = 103); 17.1% (n = 71) identified other platforms.

Data Collection

A structured internet-based questionnaire was used to extract information from the participants via social media and university-related web platforms. Before they participated, the respondents were told about the study's objective and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Respondents entered the survey on a voluntary basis and electronic informed consent was secured prior to data collection. To increase the quality of the data source, an attention-check item was embedded with all responses that failed this check or had very large portions missing dropped. The data collection lasted four months (October 2025–January 2026) to enable students from different types of HEIs throughout the country to participate.

Measures and Data Analysis

All constructs were measured by multi-items scales that are extracted from well-established instruments and only minor nuances have been made to the wording to be more compatible with the Azerbaijani higher education. Both scales were scored in a five point version of the Likert format (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). SMR was implemented through items that were designed to measure social media users' perceived timeliness, sufficiency, and relevance of response on the site (Dunn & Grimes, 2022; Istanbuluoglu & Sakman, 2024). PES was conceptualized as a higher-order factor including Interactive Engagement and Supportive Engagement based on dialogic communication and social presence theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Men et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021). DT examined trust in universities' Internet-based communication such as trust dimensions of credibility and Information reliability (McKnight et al., 2002). IR were a reflection of students' general assessment of institutional reputation based on the Reputation Quotient and higher education reputation research (Fombrun et al., 2000; Stoica et al., 2025). A pilot with a small group of students tested clarity and cultural relevance with feedback leading to minor refinements.

Data analysis The SmartPLS 4 was employed to compute a Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM) because it has been recommended sustained models with latent variables and mediating effects as addressed in this study (Hair et al., 2017). Reliability for internal consistency (≥ 0.70), convergent validity (≥ 0.50), and discriminant validity (< 0.90 , ideally < 0.85) were evaluated with Cronbach's alpha and the compound reliability (CR); average variance extracted (AVE) and HTMT were used to measure these three aspects of construct validity respectively. The structural model was examined based on the calculation of path coefficients (β)

and p values under bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Explanation power was tested through R^2 and the predictive relevance by Q^2 on the basis of the Stone-Geisser criterion. Special scrutiny was paid to examining the serial mediation model (SMR \rightarrow PES \rightarrow DT \rightarrow IR) with analysis of indirect effects and testing for direct effects in addition or not to such strategy.

Literature Review

The influence of social media on institution perception has transformed dramatically from just another means to disseminate information into the nucleus for strategic communication and reputation management. This section outlines the core theories, studies and evidence that contribute to our understanding of the connection between social media responsiveness, public engagement strategy, digital trust and institutional reputation. (Pawar, 2024; Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Responsive Social Media and Institutional Reputation

Originally, SMR was thought about as the direct determinant of positive institutional effects and with speed acting as a predominate factor. But a growing body of literature suggests that such a relationship is not as straightforward. Prompt actions can of course alleviate such negative preference (Men and Tsai, 2012), but the responding itself may not be a strong basis for building long-term reputation. From the lens of Dynamic Capabilities Theory, SMR can be considered as an organizational capability to sense and capture opportunities for engagement. Yet for this competence to become a sustainable competitive advantage in the manner of reputation, it has to be embedded within more general strategic functions conducive to developing real connection and trust (Teece, 2007). Within HEIs, students expect not only prompt responses, but also interactions that are relevant to their needs and show that care is taken by the institution. (Dunn and Grimes, 2022; Istanbuluoglu and Sakman, 2024).

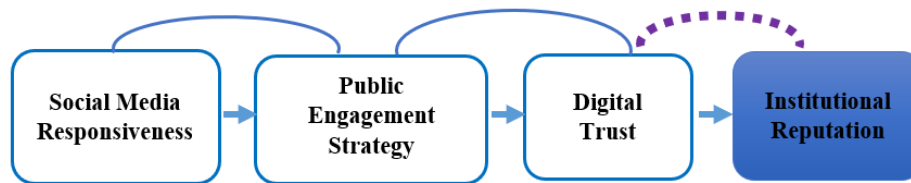
Mediating role of Strategy for Public Engagement

PES on social media for an institution describes the active methods of interacting with the audience. This is not just limited to SMR, however; it also refers to the quality, content and dialogical nature of interactions. According to dialogic public relations (hereinafter referred to as DPR) theory, there are the principles of two-way communication, mutual understanding and relationship building' for PR effectiveness (Kent and Taylor, 2002). Under this approach, PES can encompass different responses such as interactive (questioning, discussions) and supportive (empathy,

problem-solving). We suspect that there is not a direct effect of SMR on IR but an indirect one through the degree of execution of a good PES. What sort of person would rather be ignored than be told, "We don't want your business or to even engage with you?" In short, a quick response can actually lead and assist in a more effective engagement strategy giving the institution a more human face. (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Men et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021).

Mediator of Digital Trust

Digital trust (DT) is a fundamental aspect of interactions in the online domain, and reflects the extent to which stakeholders are willing to use an organization's digital systems and communications. In the university setting, DT may include perceptions regarding online trust in terms of reliability, security and integrity for interactions with the university in higher education. Developing DT is necessary for maintaining the best relationships and a strong reputation. PES is also expected to be a major driver of DT. Consistent application of an interaction strategy based on dialogue and support in an institution leads to the perception of transparency, reliability, and care: fundamentals for trust (McKnight et al., 2002). We propose that SMR, rather than influencing DT itself as one might expect based on current hypothesis, allows PES to take place and thereby influences trust building (and the accumulated trust) from which IR is directly derived. (McKnight et al., 2002).



Serial Mediation: SMR → PES → DT → IR

Figure 1: The Serial Mediation Model of Social Media Responsiveness and Institutional Reputation

Based on these theoretical perspectives, we develop a sequential mediation model. We hypothesize SMR is not directly related to IR. Rather, effective SMR underlies a strong PES on basis of interactive and supportive dialog. This top-notch PES generates DT with relevant stakeholders, because they view the organization as dependable, transparent and caring. It is this pre-existing DT that finally gives rise to an increased IR. This model indicates that responsiveness alone is not sufficient, useful only in facilitating a constructive engagement while trust and reputation mature. This insight is especially important for HEIs in developing countries such as Azerbaijan, where digital communication norms and trust development may not be

the same as those typically found in more mature digital economies. By addressing this intricate relationship from the perspective of serial mediation, a clearer picture emerges of how HEIs can develop social media strategies as tactical tools for building reputation. (Teece, 2007; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Contextual Handicaps in Higher Education in Azerbaijan

The higher education system of Azerbaijan faces specific challenges such as competitive struggle to ensure enrollment, urgent necessity in intensification of internationalization and dynamic spread of digital communication technologies. In spite of the increasing maturation in social media, they may not have abandoned transactional fast pitch methods for strategic quality engagement. This situation highlights the need for research that assists in orienting HEIs towards more effective deployment of social media policies which are capable of fostering trustful environments and reputations, factors that have bearing on their sustainability and competitiveness. (Maresova et al., 2020; Eger et al., 2021; Stoica et al.

Results

Measurement and structural models were examined through PLS-SEM analysis. The results offer firm evidence to the proposed serial mediation model. The measurement model was assessed for reliability and construct validity of all constructs.

Reliability As already mentioned, all factors showed very good internal consistency with values of *CR* (Composite Reliability) well above the threshold of 0.9 (e.g., *SMR CR* = 0.91, *PES CR* = 0.93, *DT CR* = 0.92; *IR CR* = 0.94). It also exceeded the threshold value of 0.7 for Cronbach's Alpha value.

Convergent Validity: The Average Variance Extracted (*AVE*) for all the constructs was higher than 0.7 (eg *SMR AVE* = 0.72, *PES AVE* = 0.78, *DT AVE* = 0.75, *IR AVE* = 0.79) suggesting that each construct explains a substantial amount of variance in the items from which it is composed.

Discriminant Validity: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (*HTMT*) was below 0.86, indicating all constructs are different from each other and captures a unique concept. These strong findings demonstrate the psychometric quality of the scales in this study.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
SMR	—	0.91	0.72
PES	—	0.93	0.78

DT	—	0.92	0.75
IR	—	0.94	0.79

Note: All HTMT estimates were lower than the cutoff levels referred to in Results.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was evaluated to analyze the proposed associations between SMR, PES, DT, and IR. The model fit was acceptable with a SRMR of 0.057 (this model insensitively measures the deviation between ~ 0 and ≥ 0.08) indicating a good-fitting model to data.

Direct Effects:

The direct relationship from SMR to IR was also non-significant ($\beta = 0.02$, $p > 0.05$). This indicates that the act of being responsive on social media does not necessarily lead to an enhancement of institutional reputation.

Indirect Effects and Serial Mediation:

There was a strong positive influence from SMR to Public Engagement Strategy (PES) ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$).

PES, in its turn, maintained a strong direct positive impact on Digital Trust (DT) ($\beta = 0.58$; $p < 0.001$).

Lastly, DT significantly influenced Institutional Reputation (IR) in a positive manner ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$).

More importantly, the consecutive mediating effect (SMR \rightarrow PES \rightarrow DT \rightarrow IR) was a significant path ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$). This provides evidence for a complete serial mediation in which SMR has an effect on IR completely through PES and DT.

Table 3. Structural Model Results

Path	β	p-value	Result
SMR \rightarrow IR	0.02	> 0.05	Not supported
SMR \rightarrow PES	0.45	< 0.001	Supported
PES \rightarrow DT	0.58	< 0.001	Supported
DT \rightarrow IR	0.61	< 0.001	Supported
SMR \rightarrow PES \rightarrow DT \rightarrow IR (serial indirect)	0.36	< 0.001	Supported

*Model fit: SRMR = 0.08. R² for Institutional Reputation (IR) = 0.58
(as reported in the evaluation report).*

Model Performance

There was also good power of explanation for the model. SMR and PES accounted for 58% of the institutional reputation variance, and demonstrated out-of-sample

predictive validity. Overall, SMR serves as a hygiene factor facilitating engagement leading to digital trust and reputation but the direct effect of SMR on IR was not significantly differently from zero.

Conclusion

The results suggest that responsiveness is not a reputation-enhancing action per se. Instead, SMR facilitates a more structured PES that can lead to DT and it is that which drives IR directly. Therefore, reputation earnings are based on the quality of dialogic supportive expressions rather than the faster responses.

Implications

Universities need to move KPIs away from response time and towards engagement quality (dialogue depth, problem resolution, student satisfaction), unite social media teams with student services and deliver transparent, consistent communication to create DT. This method can help with inquiry-to-enrollment conversion and lead to significant revenue increases (potential \$180,000–\$300,000 annually for a mid-sized institution). Recommendations and training that focus on dialogic engagement and building trust may be appealing to policymakers.

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