



The Mediating Role of Brand Image and Awareness in The Relationship Between Digital Public Relations and Students' Intention to Enroll in University

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Abstract: Objective: To investigate the mediating roles of brand image and brand awareness in the relationship between Digital Public Relations and students' intention to enroll in Palestinian universities. **Methodology:** A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed using an online structured questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of 401 prospective and current university students in the West Bank, Palestine. Previously validated scales were used to measure Digital Public Relations, brand image, brand awareness, and enrollment intention. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 to examine the direct and indirect relationships among the study variables. **Key Findings:** Digital Public Relations had significant positive effects on brand image ($\beta = 0.688, p < 0.05$) and brand awareness ($\beta = 0.765, p < 0.05$). Brand image ($\beta = 0.159, p < 0.05$) and brand awareness ($\beta = 0.380, p < 0.05$) significantly enhanced students' intention to enroll. However, the direct effect of Digital Public Relations on enrollment intention was insignificant ($\beta = 0.083, p > 0.05$). Mediation analysis confirmed that brand image and brand awareness fully mediated this relationship, with brand awareness showing the stronger mediating effect. **Conclusions:** Digital Public Relations influences students' enrollment intentions indirectly by strengthening brand awareness and enhancing brand image. The findings support the integration of Social Cognitive Theory and Signaling Theory in explaining students' enrollment decisions. **Recommendations:** Palestinian universities should prioritize strategic Digital Public Relations initiatives that strengthen institutional branding, enhance brand awareness and image, and improve student recruitment, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

Keywords: Digital Public Relations, Brand Image, Brand Awareness, Students' Intention to Enroll, Higher Education, Palestine.

الدور الوسيط لصورة العلامة التجارية والوعي بها في العلاقة بين العلاقات العامة الرقمية ونية الطلاب للالتحاق بالجامعة

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المخلص: الهدف: هدفت الدراسة إلى اختبار الدور الوسيط لكل من الصورة الذهنية للعلامة التجارية والوعي بالعلامة التجارية في العلاقة بين العلاقات العامة الرقمية ونية الطلبة للالتحاق بالجامعات الفلسطينية. **المنهجية:** اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الكمي باستخدام التصميم الوصفي المقطعي، وجمعت البيانات من خلال استبانة إلكترونية وزعت على عينة ميسرة بلغت (401) طالباً وطالبة من الطلبة المحتملين وال الحاليين في جامعات الضفة الغربية. واستندت الاستبانة إلى مقاييس سبق التحقق من صدقها وثباتها، وخلصت البيانات باستخدام نمذجة المعادلات الهيكلية بالمرعات الصغرى الجزئية (PLS-SEM) عبر برنامج SmartPLS 4. **أهم النتائج:** أظهرت النتائج وجود تأثير إيجابي دال إحصائياً للعلاقات العامة الرقمية في الصورة الذهنية للعلامة التجارية ($\beta = 0.688, p < 0.05$) والوعي بالعلامة التجارية ($\beta = 0.765, p < 0.05$). كما تبين أن الصورة الذهنية ($\beta = 0.159, p < 0.05$) والوعي بالعلامة التجارية ($\beta = 0.380, p < 0.05$) يعززان نية الطلبة للالتحاق بالجامعة. في المقابل، لم يكن التأثير المباشر للعلاقات العامة الرقمية في نية الالتحاق ذا دلالة إحصائية ($\beta = 0.083, p > 0.05$). وأكد تحليل الوساطة وجود وساطة كلية لكل من الصورة الذهنية والوعي بالعلامة التجارية، مع تفوق الوعي بالعلامة التجارية في قوة التأثير الوسيط. **الاستنتاجات:** تؤثر العلاقات العامة الرقمية في نية الطلبة للالتحاق بالجامعات بصورة غير مباشرة من خلال تعزيز الوعي بالعلامة التجارية وتحسين الصورة الذهنية، بما يدعم تكامل نظرية التعلم الاجتماعي المعرفي ونظرية الإشارة في تفسير قرارات الالتحاق. **التوصيات:** توصي الدراسة الجامعات الفلسطينية بتبني استراتيجيات فعالة للعلاقات العامة الرقمية تركز على بناء العلامة التجارية، وتعزيز الوعي والصورة الذهنية للمؤسسة، بما يساهم في تحسين استقطاب الطلبة، خاصة في البيئات محدودة الموارد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلاقات العامة الرقمية، الصورة الذهنية للعلامة التجارية، الوعي بالعلامة التجارية، نية الالتحاق بالجامعة، مؤسسات التعليم العالي، فلسطين.

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Introduction

In the era of intensifying digital transformation and growing competition in higher education, universities are faced with more than ever before with the task of attracting potential students' interest (Akour & Alenezi, 2022). The digital world has transformed the way institutions communicate their values, engage with stakeholders, and develop their brand personalities (Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024). Student recruitment plays a vital role in the development and sustainability of institutions of higher learning. To start with, effective recruitment ensures financial independence through stable tuition revenues, which is paramount to ensuring the sustainability of operations (Son-Turan, 2021). Secondly, recruiting a skilled and diversified pool of students enhances the quality of the academic community and institution's credibility (Abo-Khalil, 2024; Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022). Third, efficient recruitment strategies serve the strategic long-term interests of universities by coordinating enrollment with workforce and institutional needs (Adewolu Ogwo, 2024; Ul Hassan et al., 2025).

However, Palestinian universities face a series of significant challenges in enrolling new students. Of course, the first and most important challenge is the limited financial capacity of the majority of families, which limits access to higher education and decreases the number of potential students (Almassri, 2025; Shibib, 2021). Another challenge is

increased competition among regional and local universities, which makes it difficult for institutions to differentiate (Abusamra, 2023; Awad & Salaimeh, 2023). A third challenge is minimal use of modern marketing and online engagement techniques that deters efforts to recruit technologically savvy youth in a rapidly transforming digital world (Muhtaseb, 2022). These challenges are the major impetus for pursuing this study as they illustrate the need to investigate more effective means of enrolling students within the Palestinian higher education framework.

Additionally, student enrollment is affected by a range of internal and external organizational variables, including institutional reputation (Fakhrudin et al., 2024), academic program quality (Kim & An, 2024), financial aid availability (Dynarski et al., 2023), and marketing performance, especially digital public relations (Sabakpo, 2023). Of these, the current study particularly aims to examine the effect of digital public relations (Digital PR) on student enrollment. This focus is driven by the observation, from the literature review, that there is a notable lack of research investigating this correlation within the Palestinian higher education system.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), as conceptualized by Bandura (2001), provides a highly captivating theoretical structure to examine the effect of Digital Public Relations (DPR) upon the enrollment decisions of students. Essentially, SCT presumes that

human behavior is not only shaped by direct experience, but also by vicarious learning and symbolic interaction—mainly through mediated environments. In the higher education sector, DPR channels such as social media, websites, and campaigns serve as symbolic locations where learners observe, comprehend, and acquire institutional messages. From these, learners create perceptions, expectations, and affective relations that ultimately drive their intent to enroll.

Building on this theoretical foundation, a growing amount of empirical work has investigated the impact of DPR on student recruitment and has agreed in a general consensus about its significance. A number of studies have indicated that DPR activities, particularly when executed through social media, positively impact primary branding outcomes like awareness, interaction, and emotional connection—each of which builds to increased student interest and enrollment behavior (Pasaribu & Achmadi, 2024; Wulandari & Gunarto, 2024). Such evidence shows that DPR acts not just as a communication tool but also as a strategic one with the power to shape student decision-making processes through observation and symbolic mechanisms outlined by SCT.

Despite this theoretical convergence with evidence, there remains a critical contradiction—namely, within the Palestinian higher education context. While both SCT and global research affirm DPR as the predominant influencer of enrollment behavior, the lion's

share of Palestinian universities continues to fail to attract and enroll students. This contradiction issues a warning about an explanatory gap that is yet to be sufficiently filled: in case DPR pays off theoretically and empirically, why do its effects not manifest themselves in the student recruiting patterns in Palestine? The fact that the attempts of DPR did not manage to break into quantifiable enrollment gains in this situation necessitates a more sensitive exploration of the intervening variables and underlying relations between the DPR and enrollment relationship.

In order to fill this gap, the current research hypothesizes the existence of two important mediating variables, which are brand awareness and brand image. Such dimensions of brand equity are generally familiar in marketing and education branding literatures as the most critical consumer behaviour drivers. Brand awareness: brand awareness would be the level at which a potential student recognizes and recalls the image and name of a university but the brand image would be the implication, emotions and perceptions that students would have towards the institution. These constructs can explain why the DPR efforts can work in some settings and fail in others most notably in the resource poor and sociopolitically challenging and fast changing digital settings.

Therefore, the study does not simply address the purpose of investigating the direct effects of DPR on the enrollment intentions of students, but seeks the mediating factors of this relationship as well. By searching analysis in

SCT and operationalizing brand awareness and brand image as the intervening variables, the study aims to offer a theoretically congruent and empirically powerful explanation of how DPR influences the behavior of Palestinian higher education environment students. In such a way, the study makes a very rich contribution to the world of research and practice in institutions by redefining DPR as an emerging, situation-specific process, one that requires strategic alignment with the psychological, cultural, and communicational aspects of student engagement.

This work obtains a certain topicality in the context of Palestinian higher education. There are also multifaceted constraints facing the activities of the colleges in Palestine which include poverty, political instability, and reduced opportunities of international cooperation which directly have an implication on their ability to recruit or retain students. The presence of these macro-environmental problems has increased the level of competition among the local universities as they are forced to adopt the use of digital communication channels to help them be seen and be able to keep in touch with the prospective students. Therefore, delving into the mediation essence of both brand image and brand awareness on the relationship between digital PR and enrolment intention of the students presents not only theoretical development, but also practical recommendations to the universities struggling to uphold their institutional image and competitiveness in such a constrained

environment. The study contextualizes the research in these realities of the world, and it constitutes the original knowledge to the literature of global higher education marketing because of its context-specific model using Palestinian experience.

Literature Review

The connection between digital PR (DPR), brand image, brand awareness, and the enrollment intentions of students has been an issue of research interest over the last few years. Although there has been an increased amount of research that has been conducted to study these constructs individually, a careful analysis of their association displays that there are general gaps that will be addressed by this research. This review summarizes the findings of the published literature to provide theoretical underpinnings, empirical evidence, and limitation of methods used in previous research and the scientific quality of the study.

Theoretical Pillars and Conceptualizations.

The Social Cognitive Theory is adequate to explain the formation of student decisions at DPR. This theory presumes that the behavior of the persons, i.e. the choice of a university, is not directly dependent on the existing experience but vicarious learning and symbolic interaction via websites (Bandura, 2001). In the case of higher education, DPR activities are early means of establishing positive impressions on potential applicants and, therefore, making a positive impact on the brand perceptions of the institution. Yet while Haque et al. (2025) applied social cognitive theory to the study of

responsible leadership and university reputation, its application to the intervening mechanisms of brand image and awareness remains an underexplored field.

Signaling Theory, another relevant theory, has likewise been applied in examining the role of the public relations (PR) function in achieving brand equity for universities (Effah, 2020). Effah et al. (2024) study shows how PR takes the central mediating position in university brand image, identity, and reputation-university brand equity associations. Even as this study indicates the salience of PR, it fails to investigate the specific mechanisms through which digital communication approaches affect brand-outcome related phenomena. This is a gap to be filled through further insight into DPR's impact on brand equity, particularly via the mediating functions of brand image and awareness.

A combination of Social Cognitive Theory and Signaling Theory offers an in-depth modeling of the approach to the impact of digital public relations on the intentions of students to enroll. Whereas Signaling Theory describes what universities are signaling to students by using digital means, e.g. quality, reputation and institutional credibility, Social Cognitive Theory describes how students can observe, imitate, and learn vicariously to they interpret what they are seeing. Simply stated, Signaling Theory is considered to be supply-side of the information, by looking at the deliberate signals that institutions send, and Social Cognitive Theory is an approach that

looks at the demand side, so that potential students cognitively and affectively perceive and act on these signals in the formation of brand-related perceptions and behavioral intentions. These two theories are therefore synergized in that they couple institutional delivery of messages to an individual level perception formation, which is a dual level explanation of how digital PR influences the formation of enrolment behavior in higher learning institutions.

Empirical Insights and Key Findings

Various studies have explored the influence of branding factors on the decision of higher education by the students. An example of such is a comprehensive literature review of branding in higher education that was made by Snadrou and Haoucha (2024) with particular focus on the dual nature of brand image, emotional and rational, and how it affects decision making tendencies of the students. On the same note, Magasi and Bwemelo (2024) investigated brands reputation and perceived benefits as predictors of Tanzanian university enrollment intentions. Using the mixed-method approach, their findings showed that brand names and slogans have positive effects on the enrollment decisions while brand logos don't. These findings reflect the prevalence of branding procedures in higher education and conclude that more studies on differential effects of various building blocks of branding are warranted.

Pasaribu and Achmadi (2024) examined social media marketing as an

influence of intention to enroll via mediator's consumer brand involvement, brand consideration, and brand image. Their results indicate that effective social media marketing enhances brand awareness and fosters positive brand perceptions, ultimately increasing enrollment intentions. However, the study is geographically limited to Jakarta and Tangerang, raising questions about its generalizability to other contexts. Additionally, Pasaribu and Achmadi acknowledge the need for future research to incorporate diverse social media platforms and additional variables such as content quality and interaction frequency.

Other scholars have explored the interplay between trust, brand awareness, and digital marketing in higher education marketing. Barus (2023) emphasizes the critical role of trust and brand awareness in attracting potential students, while Marhareita et al. (2022) highlight the positive impact of social media marketing on brand awareness, image, and attitude. In spite of these contributions, the majority of studies emphasize direct relationships and not the mediating roles of brand image and awareness in the DPR-enrollment intention relationship.

Methodological Limitations and Research Gaps

Although current research offers useful insights, a number of methodological limitations prevent a thorough understanding of the subject. To begin with, most studies are based on cross-sectional designs, which restrict their capacity to determine causal relationships

(Bohara et al., 2022; Magasi & Bwemelo, 2024). Second, geographic and institutional constraints reduce the external validity of findings. For instance, Pasaribu and Achmadi (2024) targeting private universities in Jakarta and Tangerang might not represent general trends in various regions or institutions. Third, quantitative and qualitative methods are not well-integrated, which might give deeper insights into the nuances of students' decision-making processes.

Besides this, gender-moderating effects are also relatively less studied. Bohara et al. (2022) found that brand awareness variables exert strong influences on all phases of the enrollment decision-making process even when the moderator is included as student gender. They primarily research management schools and colleges, and there are a number of questions still pending to be answered about how the dynamics are in other studies and cultures.

Contribution of the Current Study to Science

The current study fills gaps in research as noted above through the adoption of a generic theoretical framework in which to verify the mediating roles of awareness and brand image between DPR and students' enrollment intentions and not as in comparable previous research using such variables as independent variables or secondary outcome variables. In doing so, it offers greater clarity in how DPR strategies might be optimized to optimize

institutional branding and recruit prospective students.

Methodologically, the study applies advanced statistical techniques to examine data from a heterogeneous sample, rendering findings more generalizable. By incorporating insights from social cognitive theory, electronic marketing, and university administration, the study advances scholarly literature and practice applications in higher education branding.

Last but not least, the current research does not only fill some of the gaps that exist in the current literature but also sets a new standard that other future research on the intersectionality of digital communication, branding, and student decision-making on the university level should adhere to. It is especially important in the applications of the managers of university that want to apply evidence-based marketing practices in the highly competitive and digitized environment.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development.

The theoretical framework of this research paper is strongly rooted in the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) on the premises of Bandura (2001). In SCT, the proximal experience not only determines human behavior, including university enrollment, but also through vicarious learning and symbolic interactions provoked by information technologies. Digital Public Relations (DPR) is a very potent tool in the university education to foster good relationships with the prospective students, forming good impressions of an institution

brand. This research combines three important constructs namely Digital Public Relations, Brand Image and Brand Awareness in order to determine the effects they exert on the intention of students to attend the university. The constructs are interdependent and relate with each other in a dynamic manner to work together to influence the decision-making behavior of the potential students.

Digital Public Relations (DPR).

The Digital Public Relations (DPR) is already an inseparable application in the existing education system where colleges and universities are already confronted with the issues of digitalization, along with an increased competition. DPR pertains to institutionalized application of digital media in sharing institutional values, stakeholder communication and relationship development (Ki et al., 2024; Qurniawati et al., 2024). Scholarship has established that effective DPR facilitates institutional reputation and trust by prospective students Al-Shaikh et al. (2023), Ramadhan and Patrianti (2024). For instance, Özgen et al. (2023) describe the role of DPR in filling knowledge gaps and improving public image, and Satria (2024) identifies its capacity to leverage social media platforms to optimize institutional branding. Zhou and Xu (2021) further expound DPR's dialogic imperatives and mention affordances like interactivity, accessibility, and persistence in engaging stakeholders in a significant manner. Çataldaş and Özgen (2023) expound further on the idea and present the incorporation of artificial

intelligence (AI) in DPR, where AI-powered analytics are said to speed up targeted communication plans to diverse student populations. Pasaribu and Achmadi (2024) demonstrate that DPR activities, in this case, social media promotion, can contribute significantly to consumer-brand interaction, brand awareness, and brand image, all of which result in stronger intentions to enroll.

Brand Image

Brand Image is a student attitude and association definition to an institution (Zia et al., 2021). Brand Image is among the factors influencing students' trust, loyalty, and ultimately enrollment intentions (Bernarto et al., 2020; Shamsudin et al., 2022). Effah (2020) puts forth the position of brand image in university selection, while Kharisma and Haryono (2024) show its mediating role in antecedents and student decision towards university selection. Zia et al. (2021) illustrate brand image to be one of the antecedents drivers of brand equity influencing students' enrollment decision. Their findings confirm brand image as a mediator of the relationship between brand equity and brand loyalty and confirm its central role in institutional branding. Dewi et al. (2020) confirm the positive impact of brand image on purchase intentions, equivalent to enrollment intentions. They argue that favorable brand image enhances emotional attachment and rational consideration, both of which are central roles in higher education choice making. Bhattacharya and Faisal (2020) highlight social media usage

in creating brand identity after crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as a response to responsiveness and flexibility of web communication planning.

Brand Awareness

Brand Awareness is the degree to which potential students know and are able to recall the name and identity of an institution (Zia et al., 2021). There is also a strong relationship between enhanced brand awareness and enhanced enrollment intentions (Bohara et al., 2022; Minh & Mai, 2024). Dumitriu et al. (2020) hypothesize that online marketing strategies are highly influential towards universities' brand awareness, hence the students' decision-making process. Bohara et al. (2022) discover that brand awareness determinants have a significant influence on every stage of the decision process for student registration even after holding them constant by gender. They are in the position of generating DPR strategies which will counter gendered variations in information processing as well as making decisions. Mulyani and Hermina (2023) illustrate how digital marketing has an increasing effect on brand awareness, which has a significant correlation with DPR activity. They realize the effect of frequent and timely content towards high awareness of a brand, affecting the intention to register.

Hypotheses Development

The research seeks to investigate the interconnected relationship between Digital Public Relations, brand image, brand

awareness, and students' intention to study at university.

Main Hypothesis:

- There exists a digital public relations impact on students' university study intention, and intervening variables are brand image and awareness.

Sub-Hypotheses Regarding Brand Image

- H1: there is a significant positive relationship between digital PR and brand image.
- H2: there is a significant positive relationship between digital pr and brand awareness.
- H3: there is a significant positive relationship between brand image and Students' Intention to Enroll in University.
- H4: there is a significant positive relationship between brand awareness and Students' Intention to Enroll in University.
- H5: there is a significant positive relationship between digital PR and Students' Intention to Enroll in University.
- H6: brand image mediates the relationship between digital pr and Students' Intention to Enroll in University.
- H7: brand awareness mediates the relationship between digital pr and Students' Intention to Enroll in University.

The study fills important literature research gaps by investigating mediating roles of brand awareness and brand image between digital public relations and university enrollment intention among students. Based on

the Social Cognitive Theory and integrating the concepts of digital marketing and higher education branding, the research offers the theoretical framework of DPR activities to establish institutional branding and attract potential students. Figure (1) shows the study model:

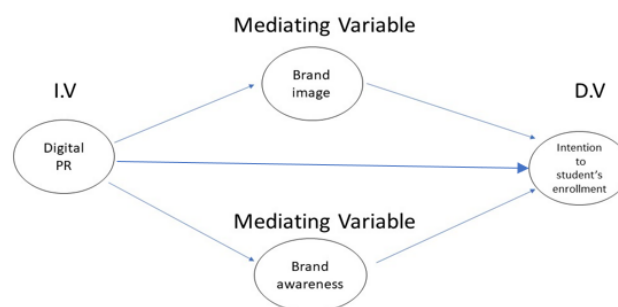


Figure (1): Study model

Methodology

Research Approach

In the conceptual framework, the research used a quantitative research methodology to suitably serve the primary outlooks of the research, namely, to research the relations between the variables chosen and to test the hypothesized relationships. The most suitable one was quantitative methodology since it allows to receive generalizable results, statistical analysis and objective measure of concepts. The specified approach matches the kind of research questions under investigation, especially the ones that strive to measure the impact of online public relations on the intention to register among the students, through brand image and brand awareness as an intermediary variable.

Study Population and Sampling Technique

The population for the study of the research was Palestinian students seeking higher

education in universities in the West Bank. Given the changing nature of student populations and practical difficulties in reaching a geographically dispersed sample, convenience sampling as a methodology was selected by the researchers. This was a technique that allowed for successful data reaping without sacrificing accessibility and cost-effectiveness.

Data was collected using an online survey instrument (Google Forms), which was distributed on various social media platforms, university forums, and by direct email exchange. Before accessing the core questionnaire, participants were presented with an electronic consent form outlining the research purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality measures, and unfettered ability to withdraw at anytime. Only individuals providing explicit consent were permitted to proceed to the actual questionnaire.

Bearing in mind that the total population of Palestinian higher education applicants to West Bank universities is estimated at around 95,885 (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2025), the selected sample size of 401 falls within the statistically recommended size to ascertain valid and generalizable results. According to Stephen Thompson's rule for estimating sample size at a confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 5% (Thompson & Fox, 2014), a suitable sample size for a population size of this estimate is about 383 individuals.

The sample size of 401 is actually well above the minimum, thereby making the study more reliable and accurate. Oversampling in this manner makes up for potential heterogeneity in the population and strengthens the statistical analysis. Further, power analysis testing guaranteed that the sample size chosen is very sufficient and suitable to identify medium effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.15$) at a 0.05 alpha level with a 0.80 statistical power. The sample size chosen is thus sufficient and justified to achieve the research objectives satisfactorily.

Data Collection Tool

To adequately quantify the significant constructs being examined, the study employed a structured self-completion questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire was developed through tried and tested scales from existing scholarly studies to ensure maximum content validity and reliability. Specifically, the independent variable, Digital Public Relations (DPR), was measured through a modified multi-item scale from Mahmoud (2021), who researched the use of digital public relations in service marketing in the Egyptian hotel industry. Their scale demonstrated strong psychometric properties and therefore was appropriate for application in the current context of higher learning institutions. The outcome variable, enrollment intention among the students, was measured using a Bohara et al. (2022) scale, which was originally made to measure the degree to which brand awareness influences the decision-making of the students in the context of an

institution of higher learning. This scale has been extensively used in research on educational marketing and it has good reliability and validity. Two mediating variables were also considered in the model: brand image and brand awareness that come out of Khalid (2024) who investigated the impact of guerrilla marketing strategies on the consumption behavior of Generation Y. These scales have been widely used in branding and consumer research and have been characterized by transparency and utility in the measurement of abstract constructs. Everything was translated back to Arabic and conceptual equivalence and semantic validity were in place. Few alterations were done to suit the language and setting to the Palestinian university students. The questionnaire applied a five-point Likert-type scale because respondents were consistently asked to agree or perceive the relevance of each statement.

Measurement model

In order to determine the validity of the measurement model of PLS-SEM, convergent and discriminant validity were measured with respect to the accepted criteria. The convergent validity was established using three indicators namely Rho A, Cronbachs alpha and composite reliability, which are greater than the suggested value of 0.7, which is a strong internal consistency indicator. Also, all the items retained were above 0.60 factor loading. Even though some of the AVE values were going to be just below a 0.5 mark recommended by Hair et al. (2011), convergent validity was

considered acceptable when composite reliability was over 0.6 (Shrestha, 2021). The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to measure discriminant validity, after which each construct was highly linked to its indicators than to the indicators of other constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). Also, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was implemented to reinforce the assessment, and all the values were below the 0.90 mark (Gold et al., 2001). As shown in Tables (1) to (3), the model was found to have acceptable levels of convergent and discriminant validity. This is also illustrated in Figure (2), which shows the measurement model.

Table (1): Reliability and convergent validity

variable	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Digital PR	A1	0.777	0.852	0.854	0.886	0.5
	A2	0.732				
	A3	0.750				
	A4	0.725				
	A5	0.685				
	A6	0.656				
	A7	0.619				
	A8	0.659				
Brand Image	B1	0.769	0.836	0.841	0.884	0.604
	B2	0.703				
	B3	0.813				
	B4	0.780				
	B5	0.816				
Brand Awareness	C1	0.755	0.786	0.794	0.853	0.539
	C2	0.737				
	C3	0.666				
	C4	0.700				
	C5	0.804				
Students' Intention to Enroll	D1	0.578	0.773	0.788	0.833	0.422
	D2	0.503				
	D3	0.681				
	D4	0.688				
	D5	0.698				
	D6	0.583				
	D7	0.703				
	D8	0.512				

Table (2): Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	Brand awareness	Brand image	Digital Public Relations
Brand awareness			
Brand image	0.646		
Digital Public Relations	0.801	0.819	
Students' Intention to Enroll	0.646	0.502	0.580

Table (3): Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion).

	Brand Awareness	Brand Image	Digital PR	Students' Intention to Enroll
Brand Awareness	0.794			
Brand Image	0.527	0.777		
Digital PR	0.702	0.689	0.764	
Students' Intention to Enroll	0.522	0.412	0.479	0.623

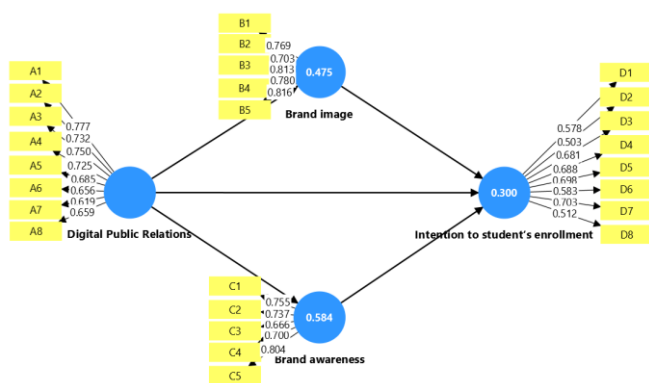


Figure (2): measurement model

Statistical analysis and result

The hypothesis relationships were analyzed using Smart PLS 4 software in this study. The analysis involved two parts, namely, the measurement model and the structural model. The outer model which was also referred to as the measurement model tested the relations between the observed items and the latent constructs Figure (3) displays the structural model. It was concerned with the measurement instrument reliability and validity. Structural model or inner-model, examined the path relationships between the latent constructs, in a bootstrapping fashion. The analytical tool used

to examine the complexity of hypotheses and test relationships among the variables was structural equation modeling (SEM) (Henseler et al., 2009; Kline, 2023).

Result:

In order to determine the impact of possible collinearity between the items on the interpretability of the model, the values of variance inflation factor (VIF) were studied. VIF values must not be greater than 5; otherwise, model predictions will not be reliable as suggested by Ringle et al. (2005). All the VIF values in the current study were within the interval of 1.000 and 2.58, which supported the fact that there were no issues of multicollinearity. Upon ascertaining this the structural (inner) model was studied and hypotheses were put to test. The path relationships were assessed by the bootstrapping technique that gives good estimates to evaluate the associations among constructs.

As shown in Table (4), the path coefficient analysis reveals that digital public relations (PR) have a significant positive effect on brand image ($\beta = 0.688$) and brand awareness ($\beta = 0.765$). Additionally, digital PR indirectly influences students' intention to enroll through both brand image ($\beta = 0.159$) and brand awareness ($\beta = 0.380$). All corresponding p-values are below 0.05, indicating statistical significance and providing empirical support for hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4. In contrast, hypothesis H5 is not supported, as the direct effect of digital PR on

students' intention to enroll is weak ($\beta = 0.083$) and statistically non-significant ($t = 0.871$, $p = 0.384$). These findings suggest that digital PR impacts enrollment decisions primarily through shaping brand-related perceptions rather than through a direct effect.

Table (4): Results of the structural (inner) model

Hyp. no.	Hypothesis statement	Path coefficient (β)	t-value	P-value	Decision
H1	Digital Public Relations -> Brand image	0.688	16.377	0.000	supported
H2	Digital Public Relations -> Brand awareness	0.765	27.494	0.000	supported
H3	Brand image -> Students' Intention to Enroll	0.159	2.071	0.038	supported
H4	Brand awareness -> Students' Intention to Enroll	0.380	4.696	0.000	supported
H5	Digital Public Relations -> Students' Intention to Enroll	0.083	0.871	0.384	Not supported

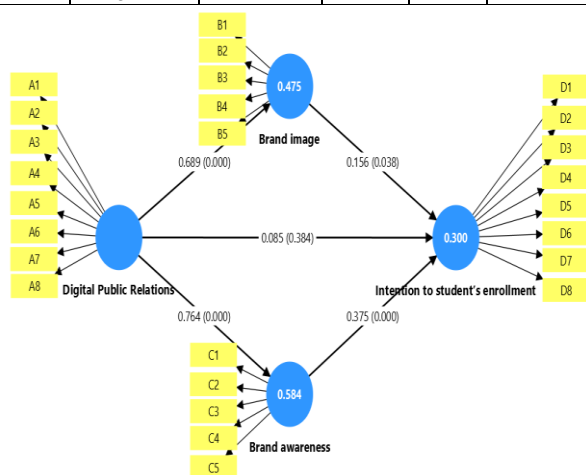


Figure (3): structural model

Table (5) presents evidence supporting hypothesis H6, indicating a full mediation and a statistically significant indirect effect of digital public relations on students' intention to enroll through brand image. Likewise,

hypothesis H7 is supported, demonstrating full mediation through brand awareness. In both cases, the total effects remain highly significant. These findings suggest that digital public relations do not directly influence students' enrollment intentions; rather, they operate by enhancing brand awareness and strengthening the institution's reputation. Consequently, transforming digital communication efforts into actual enrollment decisions depends largely on improving students' perceptions of the brand.

Table (5): Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis statement	Indirect Effect (t-value)	Total Effect (t-value)	Interpretation	conclusion
Digital Public Relations -> Brand image -> Students' Intention to Enroll	0.110*(2.027)	0.483*** (8.789)	Full mediation	H6 supported
Digital Public Relations -> Brand awareness -> Students' Intention to Enroll	0.290*** (4.777)	0.483*** (8.789)	Full mediation	H7 supported

Note. $p < 0.05$ (*), $p < 0.01$ (**), $p < 0.001$ (***); β = standardized path coefficient; t = t-statistic.

Discussion

The research results of this study give strong theoretical and contextual information about the influences of Digital Public Relations (DPR) on the enrollment intentions of students in the Palestinian higher education. The statistically significant and strong relationships between DPR and brand image (0.688, $p < 0.05$) and brand awareness (0.765, $p < 0.05$) confirm the assumptions of the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), according to which people form their attitudes and behaviors based on observational learning,

symbolic interaction, and vicarious experience and not just exposure. In the case of higher education, DPR platforms, including institutional websites, social media pages, and online campaigns, can be regarded as mediated spaces where students can see and absorb signals concerning the institutional reputation, values, and academic quality (Satria, 2024; Zhou & Xu, 2021). This is in line with the previous studies that show that digital interaction positively affects the image of the people, their trust, and emotional bond (Zia et al., 2021), which means that DPR may serve as a psychological point of connection between institutional communication and student perception.

Simultaneously, the entire mediation impact of brand image and brand awareness between DPR and intention to enroll in students is aligned with the Signaling Theory assumptions (Effah et al., 2024). In this theory, the intangible attributes communicated by organizations are credibility, quality, and reputation which are conveyed by intentional signals that shape decisions made by the stakeholders. In this research, the indirect-only lines prove the point that DPR is more of a signaling system and not a persuasive one. In particular, whereas Signaling Theory describes what universities say (e.g., academic excellence, social contribution, institutional credibility), Social Cognitive Theory describes how students receive, assess, and process these signals in mediated settings. The combination of these two theories therefore offers a two-fold

explanatory prism: the Supply side of institutional messaging is explained by the Signaling Theory, and the Demand side of message interpretation and behavioral intention formation is explained by the Social Cognitive Theory (Haque et al., 2025). The theoretical integration provides the progress of the knowledge on how digital communication is transformed into a brand-based decision-making in the higher education.

These findings are more contextualized and explanatory when applied in the Palestinian socio-cultural and economic context. The situation in which Palestinian students are forced to work is characterized by economic poverty, political turmoil, lack of movement, and limited organizational marketing power (Abusamra, 2023; Almassri, 2025). These circumstances encourage the distrust of direct promotional messages and commercial forms of online advertisements. Rather, students use reputational cues that develop over time, via trusted networks, alumni referrals, and online peer postings (Muhtaseb, 2022). This is the reason why the effect DPR had in this study could be completely mediated, the direct exposure to institutional messages does not influence Palestinian students in this case but rather the validity and the authenticity of the brand of a university developed through the course of time. The lack of a direct effect of the DPR, hence, indicates the great significance of the brand trust and symbolic reputation in a society where students and families tend to rely

on the validation on the community level, but not on the marketing of institutions exclusively.

These findings are consistent with Dumitriu et al. (2020), who highlighted that the usefulness of the digital strategies in the university is determined by how well they facilitate brand recognition and relational trust, and with Mulyani and Hermina (2023), who concluded that the usefulness of the digital strategies in the university is defined by how much they help to increase brand attachment and awareness. The DPR in the Palestinian case is not a transactional marketing mechanism, as assumed in the Social Cognitive Theory, but rather a relationship-forming and identity-asserting one, which emphasizes the importance of symbolic learning and emotional association as a behavioral force (Bandura, 2001). By maintaining prolonged and value-based digital storytelling, universities can develop affective proximity and social legitimacy, which are essential in the situation of low economic prospects and societal apprehension.

Practically speaking, the implications of these findings are that Palestinian universities need to re-strategize their DPR activities to focus less on direct persuasion and more on perception-based engagement. Considering long-term financial limitations (Almassri, 2025; Awad & Salameh, 2023), the low-cost, high-impact approach which is based on authenticity, peer promotion, and consistency of the stories should be implemented in institutions. To illustrate, the universities can

create student-created content campaigns on social media like Instagram or Tik Tok and display student experience, community work, or stories of success, which reflect the actual institutional values. On the same note, formal partnerships with a group of alumni ambassadors, NGOs operating locally, and student influencers can amplify organic brand messages and create an awareness of trust. These activities are consistent with the results of Bhattacharya and Faisal (2020) that showed that during crisis times, social media storytelling increases institutional reputation and strength.

Overall, the current study offers a context-specific and theoretically combined insight on the effects of DPR on students in emerging learning situations. As opposed to being a direct recruitment process, DPR serves as a symbolic and perceptual filter through mediated experience to build trust, familiarity and institutional credibility. The understanding of such a mediated process can allow Palestinian universities to create more real, sustainable and efficient digital communication strategies to develop student intention towards enrolling at the university despite socioeconomic and political restrictions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study give meaningful insights into the ways through which Digital Public Relations (DPR) influences students' enrollment intentions within Palestinian tertiary education. Based on Social Cognitive Theory and Signaling Theory, the study

demonstrates that DPR is one of the primary drivers of brand-related perceptions, above all brand image and brand awareness. The findings indicate that DPR does not only enhance brand image and brand awareness, but both of them also play a vital action-mediated role on the enrollment intentions. Precisely, brand image was determined to partially mediate the effects of DPR on the enrollment intention, whilst brand awareness had a higher mediation effect. Notably, no strong direct impact was established between DPR and intention to register, which implies that branding activities must be incorporated in online communication campaigns.

These outcomes highlight the critical role of the indirect pathways in the decision-making process of students, who develop cognitive and affective perception of an institution, generated during the digital interaction with an institution, as a determining factor. On the whole, the study confirms the claim that digital PR does not have a direct effect on enrollment decisions but plays a major role as the formation of institutional brand equity.

Recommendations

- Universities have to frame digital PR as a brand-making instrument by developing stories of the academic success, research success, and social values of the university. Improving brand image is necessary in that it acts as mediating variable hence boosting the enrollment intentions of students indirectly.
- Since such a strong force is the mediating power of brand awareness, it is possible to develop long, multi-channel digital campaigns with the visibility as an objective of potential students in the universities. This involves regular distribution of culture-oriented content, scholastic success tales, and interactive on-line response plans.
- Instead of making direct appeals to direct recruitment, universities should consider digital PR as a part of a larger strategic communications strategy in which the development of positive perceptions should take a higher priority than immediate recruitment results.
- Colleges will have to go beyond the superficial measures of engagement and replace them with tools to measure the shift in public opinion, brand mood, and institutional reputation. This will enable a digital PR to be quantified because it affects brand equity, a path that has been well documented in influencing the enrollment behavior.
- The digital PR departments should also work in liaison with the marketing, admissions as well as the academic departments to ensure consistency of the brand message. An integrated online presence, which supports the core values and strengths of the institution, will also be used to produce a powerful and compelling brand image.

- The national identity, regional success and neighborhood involvement stories have to be a part of content strategies. This way, the universities would be able to create emotional resonance and trust and subsequently generate brand images and awareness in a culturally sensitive manner.
- By appreciating the fact that digital PR is an indirect recruitment driver, the institutions need to acknowledge it as a crucial part of the opinion-making process, but not the recruitment technique. This will involve a paradigm shift by the universities to spend in long-term brand-building as opposed to short-term promotion activities.

Limitations and Future Research.

This study is not without limitations although its contribution is important and this should be noted down to provide a balanced interpretation of the study.

To start with, the research used a convenience-based sampling method, which, although convenient and affordable, can restrict the representativeness of the sample and, accordingly, the external validity of the findings. It is recommended that future researches employ the probability-based or stratified sampling techniques to obtain a more demographically balanced sample in different regions and institutional practices.

Second, the study employed the cross-sectional design, which involves the perception of the participants at one point in time. Though this design is appropriate to test the relationship between structures, it limits the possibility to

make causal conclusion among digital PR, brand perception, and intentions to enroll. Longitudinal or experimental studies might be used in future studies to see how the shift in digital communication strategies affect student perceptions and behaviors as they change with time.

Third, the Digital Public Relations (DPR) measurement scale has been updated to the previous literature and brought to the context of the Palestinian sphere of higher education. Although the tests of reliability and validity showed that psychometric properties are acceptable, there is a chance of the cultural and linguistic adaptation construct interpretation bias. Hence, future researchers must take into consideration creating or verifying a situation-specific DPR scale that will be specific to educational institutions in the Arab world so that it will be able to increase construct accuracy and cross-cultural trustworthiness.

In addition, quantitative data were used as the main source of information in this research, thus, offering statistical support but restricting the level of insight on why and how students develop their perceptions about the brand. Therefore, it would be possible to include a qualitative or mixed-method design (focus groups or in-depth interviews) in future research aimed at investigating the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that influence their decisions to enroll to the school.

Lastly, the comparison of public and private universities, urban and rural universities

in Palestine may also be further conducted in order to determine any contextual differences in DPR effectiveness and brand-building practices. It would also be useful to extend this line of thinking into other cultural or national contexts to establish whether mediation effects of brand image and awareness in this case are general or situational.

Disclosure Statement

1. Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical research principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participation was voluntary.

2. Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

3. Authors' Contributions

The authors jointly contributed to the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation and revision of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

4. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

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Thesis Declaration

This manuscript is not derived from a master's thesis or a doctoral dissertation.

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