Co-Creation in Public Relations: The Strategic Role of Students as Agents in Building Brand Equity at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong

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Abstrak: Transformasi digital mendorong evolusi peran siswa dari objek pasif menuju agen aktif dalam Public Relations lembaga pendidikan, yang mana ini sesuai dengan konsep co-creation yang menekan partisipasi siswa dalam membangun ekuitas merek lembaga pendidikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis mengenai mekanisme ko-kreasi Public Relation melalui peran strategis siswa dan integrasinya dengan kemitraan industri dalam membangun ekuitas merek di SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong. Metode yang digunakan adalah Studi kasus kualitatif dengan wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen di SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong. Penelitian ini mengemukakan bahwa Siswa berperan sebagai storyteller, advocate, dan authentic voice yang berkontribusi signifikan terhadap peningkatan brand awareness dibuktikan dengan pendaftaran siswa yang mencapai 338 siswa pada 2025 dan perceived quality. Penelitian ini menekan pada konseptualisasi siswa sebagai strategic PR agents dalam framework co-creation yang mana Model student-led co-creation ini menawarkan pendekatan baru dalam PR pendidikan vokasi.

Kata kunci: Ko-kreasi, Public Relations, Agen Siswa, Public Relations Pendidikan

Abstract: *Digital transformation has driven the evolution of students' roles from passive objects to active agents in the public relations of educational institutions, which is in line with the concept of co-creation that emphasises student participation in building the brand equity of educational institutions. This study aims to analyse the mechanisms of public relations co-creation through the strategic role of students and its integration with industry partnerships in building brand equity at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong. The method used is a qualitative case study with in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong. This study suggests that students play a role as storytellers, advocates, and authentic voices who contribute significantly to increasing brand awareness, as evidenced by student enrolment reaching 338 students in 2025 and perceived quality. This study emphasises the conceptualisation of students as strategic PR agents within a co-creation framework, where the student-led co-creation model offers a new approach to vocational education PR.*

Keywords: *Co-creation, Public Relations, Student Agents, Education Public Relations*

INTRODUCTION

The communication paradigm in vocational education institutions has shifted from one-way communication to interactive communication, driven by social media. As such, user-generated content (UGC), including that created by students, has now become a reliable source of information for those who wish to become students. In line with the literature on co-creation and the changing roles of stakeholders in digital value creation, this enables organizations to facilitate participation and the sharing of authentic content to build reputational excellence [1].

In an increasingly fierce competition, digital reputation, as demonstrated by online word-of-mouth and brand trust built through social media activities, has become extremely important [2]. The participatory marketing paradigm prioritizes co-creation, so conventional marketing strategies are considered inefficient without participatory and digital elements. The collaborative process in which organizations, customers, students, and industry partners actively work together to design, create, and evaluate goods, services, or content is what is called co-creation [3]. This approach emphasizes collaborative experiences through the DART framework (Dialogue, Access, Risk/Benefit Management, and Transparency) [4].

Empirical studies on education in Indonesia have found practices that are in line with the principle of co-creation, even though they do not explicitly mention it. According to Lestari et al. (2025), scientific approaches that involve students in discussions and presentations result in a dynamic of cooperation between educators and students [5]. In addition, Anggraini et al. (2025) found that the Sorting Card model

[1] Ertz, 'Co-Creation'; Nguyen, 'The Impact of Value Co-Creation Behavior on Customer Loyalty in the Service Domain'; Okuogume and Toledano, 'Co-Creation in Sustainable Entrepreneurship Education'.

[2] Ruangkanjanases et al., 'Creating Behavioral Engagement among Higher Education's Prospective Students through Social Media Marketing Activities'.

[3] Avila-Garzon and Bacca-Acosta, 'Thirty Years of Research and Methodologies in Value Co-Creation and Co-Design'.

[4] Prahalad and Ramaswamy, *Co-Creation Experiences: The next Practice in Value Creation*.

[5] Dewi Lestari and Wiwied Pratiwiri, 'Upaya Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam Meningkatkan Pemahaman Keagamaan Siswa'.

involves students in constructing their own learning experiences [6]. On a micro scale, these practices demonstrate the essence of co-creation: creating value through active participation and collaboration. Starting from this difference, this study clarifies the concept of co-creation in a more clear and strategic manner. This does not only occur in the classroom, but also in the areas of press and school brand equity development, involving students as strategic partners.

In the world of education, the participation of students and industry partners in content creation not only produces promoted content, but also increases stakeholder satisfaction, which is an important part of customer-based brand equity [7]. Stakeholder involvement in product development, services, and brand communication has been shown to improve perceptions of quality and reputation [8]. The content created by students at vocational schools has two objectives: to build confidence and demonstrate student competence. Organized industry partnerships enhance the quality signals of education, improving brand attributes such as brand association and perceived quality [9].

Co-creation builds trust and credibility, and active participation in the community can increase trust and loyalty to the brand [10]. In the context of PR, co-creation contributes to authenticity and trust, and enhances credibility and brand quality perception because it is considered more authentic than one-sided messages [11]. ΒSeveral studies in the context of vocational schools reinforce this, showing that co-creation strengthens the relevance

[6] Mira Anggraini and Nurul Aisyah, 'PENGARUH PENGGUNAAN MEDIA CARD SORT TERHADAP MINAT MEMBACA PERMULAAN PADA SISWA KELAS I SDN 23 PEMULUTAN'.

[7] Basile et al., 'Does User-Generated Content Influence Value Co-Creation in the Context of Luxury Fashion Brand Communities?'

[8] Foroudi et al., 'Co-Creating Brand Image and Reputation through Stakeholder's Social Network'; France et al., 'Exploring the Interplay between Customer Perceived Brand Value and Customer Brand Co-Creation Behaviour Dimensions'; Mvondo et al., 'Impact of International Tourists' Co-Creation Experience on Brand Trust, Brand Passion, and Brand Evangelism'.

[9] Laundon et al., 'Benefits of Co-Creating Higher Education Learning Resources'; Leem, 'An Effect of Value Co-Creation on Student Benefits in COVID-19 Pandemic'.

[10] Foroudi et al., 'Co-Creating Brand Image and Reputation through Stakeholder's Social Network'; Hajli et al., 'Branding Co-Creation with Members of Online Brand Communities'; Iglesias et al., 'Co-Creation'; Succarie, 'Examining the Implications of Islamic Teacher Education and Professional Learning'.

[11] Zniva et al., 'Be Constantly Different! How to Manage Influencer Authenticity'.

of practical learning to local industries[12], and content showcasing laboratory practices, student portfolios, and internship evidence significantly increased enrollment interest and perceptions of work readiness.[13], and engagement [14]. Co-creation in PR also plays a role in building brand equity, where the active involvement of students as internal agents is very important.[15].

However, because previous research has mostly focused on higher education, the models and strategies are often irrelevant to vocational schools with a strong vocational orientation and industry ties. Furthermore, students are usually only considered passive brand ambassadors rather than strategic agents. Therefore, this study offers three improvements to address these shortcomings: (1) integrating co-creation theory into PR practices at the vocational school level; (2) positioning students as strategic PR agents; and (3) integrating the role of students with industry collaboration in a collaborative model to build school brand equity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design[16]. The aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the co-creation-based public relations practices implemented at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore complex meanings and social dynamics through the perspectives of direct participants. The research was conducted at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong, which was selected purposively because it has innovative PR practices and involves students in public communication activities. The research subjects consisted of three main sources, namely teachers, school PR staff, and active students who participated in promotional activities.

Data collection techniques were carried out using three main methods, namely: in-depth interviews conducted with three key informants to understand

[12] Heryani et al., 'A Model of Co-Creation Strategy Implementation in Supporting the Performance of Vocational Schools in West Java'.

[13] Zhafran, 'The Effect of Digital Marketing Strategy on Increasing Interest of New Students'.

[14] Gede et al., 'The Use Of Social Media For Digital Marketing Strategies In Vocational Education (Case Study'.

[15] Merrilees et al., 'Building Brands through Internal Stakeholder Engagement and Co-Creation'.

[16] Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D*.

communication strategies and the role of students, followed by document analysis of relevant documents, including promotional brochures, activity reports, and school social media content. The data obtained was then analyzed using manual thematic analysis, which involved coding, categorization, and drawing main themes based on field findings. The analysis was guided by two theoretical frameworks, namely the dimensions of co-creation. Data validity was also maintained through triangulation of methods and sources, by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documents. In addition, member checking was carried out with informants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation and meaning of the research results..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the Public Relations strategy at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong has adopted a co-creation approach by involving students as active participants in the school's public communication process. Not only teachers and promotional staff play a role, but students also contribute to designing and disseminating communication messages through various platforms, especially social media. Activities such as creating creative videos, providing direct counseling to junior high schools, and direct testimonials from students demonstrate the synergy between the school, students, and industry partners in building a positive image of the school in the community.

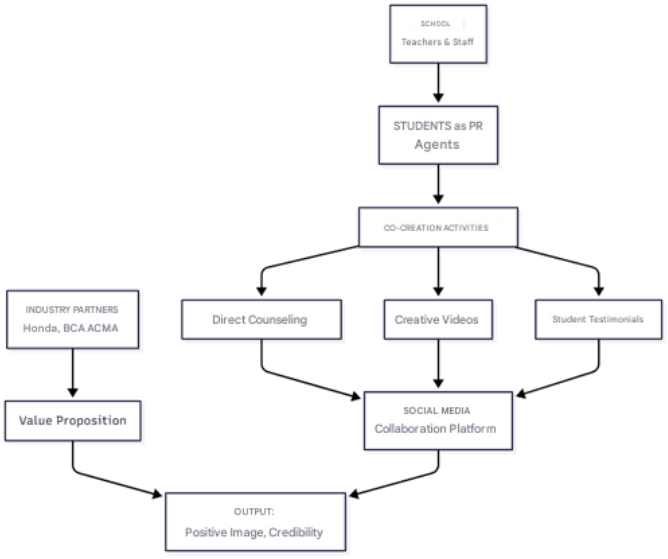

Figure 1. Visualization of Results

Student involvement is an authentic, participatory, and real-life experience-based promotional strategy, making it easier for prospective students and the community to accept the message. Therefore, social media plays a role as a collaborative space where students are not only audiences, but also storytellers and advocates who strengthen the school's credibility in the public eye. In addition, support from industry partnerships such as Honda and BCA ACMA strengthens the value proposition offered by the school, as it demonstrates a real connection between learning and the world of work.

Table 1: Matrix of Student Roles as Public Relations Agents

Strategic Role	**Activities**	**Impact on Brand Equity**	**Evidence from Data**
Storyteller	Creating creative videos, testimonials	Brand Awareness	*"creative videos to share on social media"*
Advocate	Outreach to junior high schools, achievement demonstrations	Brand Loyalty	*"as a speaker during the counseling session"*
Authentic Voice	Sharing firsthand experiences	Perceived Quality	*"highly adequate laboratory facilities"* (Sherly)
Success Evidence	Academic/non-academic achievements	Brand Associations	*"demonstrate achievements "*

The tangible impact of this strategy can be seen from the increase in the number of applicants in 2025. Data shows that 338 students enrolled at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong, predominantly in the Computer and Network Engineering (TKJ) department. This

figure indicates that the co-creation-based communication strategy involving students and industry has succeeded in increasing the appeal and public confidence in the quality of SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong.

The Role of Students as Co-Creation Agents in School Public Relations

Student involvement in promotional activities at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong shows a paradigm shift from a one-way communication strategy to a participatory strategy based on the principle of co-creation. In this process, students are no longer just recipients of messages, but also help design, produce, and disseminate narratives about the school. According to Joko Siswanto, S.Pd., "students take an active role in showcasing their achievements, as speakers during counseling sessions, or by creating creative video content to be shared on social media." This quote emphasizes that the school provides space for students to actively participate as subjects of public communication.

In this context, students act as storytellers who create authentic brand storytelling through digital media, making creative videos about learning activities, laboratory practices, and testimonials of their experiences as a means to present the school's image in a natural and convincing way. As stated by Azazi Yanto, S.Pd. (the teacher interviewed), "students usually make creative videos to share on the school's social media." This activity is not merely promotional, but rather a collaborative process in which students build a representation of the school based on their personal experiences, resulting in a narrative that is more credible in the eyes of prospective students.

In addition to being storytellers, students also act as advocates who bridge direct communication between the school and the community. They are involved in outreach activities to junior high schools or equivalent schools as speakers, sharing their experiences and motivation with prospective students. This kind of peer-to-peer communication forms a more effective emotional connection than formal promotion, because it is conveyed by figures who are considered peers or relevant. This strategy

strengthens brand trust and builds positive associations that SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong is an active, open, and collaboration-oriented school.

Furthermore, students can also become authentic voices that represent the authenticity of the school's identity. Student testimonials, such as that given by Sherly (a student who was interviewed), "I chose this school because it offers good facilities and a variety of activities," serve as social proof that strengthens the school's reputation in the eyes of prospective students and parents. Authentic voices are highly valued because they are considered more honest and representative than institutional messages [17].

Dari hasil temuan ini dapat disimpulkan bahwa peran siswa dalam Public Relation di SMKN 7 Rejang lebong yang mencerminkan praktik *co-creation* sebagaimana digagas oleh Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004), di mana nilai komunikasi diciptakan bersama antara institusi dan pemangku kepentingan. Siswa bukan sekadar objek komunikasi, melainkan aktor strategis yang menciptakan nilai baru melalui partisipasi kreatif. Pendekatan ini mampu menumbuhkan rasa memiliki (*sense of belonging*), meningkatkan engagement digital, serta memperkuat *brand equity* sekolah dari dalam.

School-Industry Collaboration as a Value Amplifier

In addition to involving students, SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong has also established strategic partnerships with industry to strengthen the school's value proposition. Based on interviews conducted, according to Joko, the school has collaborated with various partners such as Honda and BCA ACMA to channel outstanding students into the workforce. This collaboration is concrete evidence that the school is not only focused on promotion, but also on the sustainability of students' careers after graduation. In the context of public relations, industry partnerships serve as value

[17] Raaper et al., 'Negotiating Authenticity'; Aggarwal and Gujral, 'IMPACT OF ONLINE REVIEWS AND TESTIMONIALS ON STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS.'

amplifiers because they demonstrate a direct link between educational programs and the needs of the workforce [18].

Such partnerships can also build evidence-based branding narratives. The existence of industry cooperation programs allows schools to showcase student achievements, certifications, and collaborative projects as tangible successes. This is in line with the principle of co-branding in the education sector, where the reputation of industry partners contributes to the perception of the quality of educational institutions in gaining external legitimacy that strengthens the public's perception of the quality and relevance of their expertise programs. In addition to being a factor that strengthens reputation, industry partnerships also provide opportunities for students to learn directly in a professional environment. Through internship programs, technical training, and industry visits, students gain authentic experiences that they can share in the form of digital content or testimonials.

Furthermore, partnerships encourage the creation of sustainable networks between schools, alumni, and industry partners. These networks strengthen the long-term reputation of schools as adaptive and collaborative vocational institutions. From the perspective of Aaker's (1991) brand equity theory, industry cooperation strengthens the dimensions of brand association and perceived quality, because the public associates the school's name with the standards and reputation of its industry partners. This collaboration also creates mutual value creation that benefits both parties.

Conceptually, the relationship between students, schools, and industry partners at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong shows that all three actors contribute to the school's brand value. Students produce content and testimonials, schools provide a forum for communication and coordination, while industry provides validation of value and

[18] Mariah et al., 'The Role of Industry Partnerships in Advancing Vocational Training Programs'; Yoto et al., 'Increasing the Quality of Education in Vocational Schools Through Cooperation with Industry'.

career opportunities. These three elements show that public relations in vocational education is not only informative but also collaborative and transformative.

The Effectiveness of Co-Creation Strategies on School Brand Equity

The implementation of the co-creation strategy at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong has proven to have a real impact on improving the school's image and appeal. Based on interviews with Azazi Yanto, S.Pd., the number of new applicants has increased significantly from an average of 100 to 200 students per year to 338 prospective students in 2025, particularly in the Computer and Network Engineering (TKJ) department. This data shows that the collaboration-based communication strategy has successfully increased brand awareness and brand preference among the community. This increase not only reflects the effectiveness of digital promotion but also trust in the quality of the institution. This increase can be explained through Aaker's (1991) brand equity dimensions, particularly in terms of brand awareness and perceived quality.[19].

Active student participation in content creation and promotional activities creates widespread and sustained brand exposure on social media, thereby increasing public awareness of the school's existence and excellence. Meanwhile, student testimonials and industry partnerships reinforce perceptions of quality by reflecting real-world outcomes and the relevance of learning to the workplace. Additionally, active student involvement fosters brand loyalty among internal stakeholders. Students who feel they contribute to the school's image develop stronger emotional bonds and become long-term supporters of the institution, aligning with the principle of co-created loyalty, where participation in value creation fosters a sense of pride. [20].

The effectiveness of the co-creation strategy is also driven by consistency in the use of social media. According to Joko Siswanto, S.Pd (the teacher interviewed), the school regularly updates its content by showcasing activities, student achievements,

[19] Aaker, *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand*.

[20] Zamora-Ramos et al., 'Student Value Co-Creation Behaviour in The Higher Education Service Ecosystem'.

and information on flagship programs. These activities ensure continuity of communication and information about flagship programs. Overall, the co-creation strategy at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong has proven effective because it successfully integrates the main elements in building brand equity: awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty [21]. PThe increase in the number of registrants is a quantitative indicator of the success of collaborative communication, while student engagement and industry support are qualitative indicators of the effectiveness of this strategy.

This research provides an important conceptual contribution to the development of educational Public Relations (PR) theory by revising the previous institution-centric paradigm to a student-centric approa [22]. T These findings suggest that students are not only recipients of institutional communication messages, but also producers and mediators of meaning who are actively involved in disseminating school brand narratives [23], Within the framework of co-creation, the relationship between the school and students at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong reflects a dialogical, participatory, and experience-based value creation process. This theoretical contribution expands the application of co-creation theory to the field of vocational education.

Field findings reinforce the argument that student agency is a strategic resource in the brand building process of vocational schools. The active role of students as storytellers, advocates, and authentic voices shows that social and cultural capital are valuable assets in building a positive image of the institution. When students publish their learning experiences, achievements, and narratives through social media, they indirectly produce symbolic value that strengthens the dimensions of brand association and brand trust [24]. In the context of vocational education, student agency is also an

[21] Bohara et al., *Review and Bibliometric Analysis*; Qiao et al., 'Impact of Perceived Product Value on Customer-Based Brand Equity'; R and S, *BRAND ASSOCIATIONS UNVEILED*; Cambra-Fierro et al., 'Customer-Based Brand Equity and Customer Engagement in Experiential Services'.

[22] Prahalad and Ramaswamy, *Co-Creation Experiences: The next Practice in Value Creation*; Zarandi et al., 'Strategies, Benefits and Barriers– a Systematic Literature Review of Student Co-Creation in Higher Education'.

[23] Prahalad and Ramaswamy, *Co-Creation Experiences: The next Practice in Value Creation*.

[24] Aaker, *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand*.

indicator of educational success. Thus, students can be viewed as strategic PR agents who bridge the relationship between institutions..

This study also shows the importance of integration between students and industry (student–industry nexus) as a reinforcement of the authenticity of school communication messages [25]. The collaboration between SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong and partners such as Honda and BCA ACMA not only serves as a means of job training, but also strengthens the credibility of the messages conveyed by students. When students talk about their internship experiences or industry projects, their narratives become concrete evidence of the relevance of education to job requirements. This synergy adds a dimension of value co-creation as students, schools, and industries jointly produce messages that reinforce each other. Industry partnerships also serve as external validators that strengthen the perceived quality and brand authenticity of schools in the public eye .

In practical terms, this research has produced a co-creation Public Relations framework that can be adapted by other vocational schools. This framework places students at the center of communication, supported by a collaborative structure involving teachers, public relations staff, and industry partners. However, this research has limitations because it only focuses on a case study at SMKN 7 Rejang Lebong. The results obtained cannot yet be generalized to the entire context of vocational education in Indonesia. Further research is recommended using a multi-site comparative study design in various regions and fields of expertise. This approach will help reveal variations and common patterns in co-creation practices in vocational school public relations. In addition, longitudinal studies are important to assess the long-term impact of this strategy on brand equity and stakeholder loyalty.

[25] Mariah et al., 'The Role of Industry Partnerships in Advancing Vocational Training Programs'.

CONCLUSION

Co-creation-based public relations strategies through student empowerment have proven effective in building the brand equity of vocational schools. Active student involvement can create participatory communication and have a real impact on improving the image and interest of new applicants. In theory, this study introduces the "Student-Led Co-Creation in Educational Public Relations" model, which integrates the concept of student agency with industry partnerships. This model emphasizes that collaboration between students, institutions, and industry partners can be a major source of value creation in vocational education communication. In practice, vocational education institutions are advised to develop formal structures and programs that support the empowerment of students as strategic PR agents. This effort is carried out through digital literacy training, content management, and industry partnerships that enable students to play an active role in building the school's reputation in a sustainable manner.

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