Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH) (e-ISSN : 2504-8562)
2026, Volume 11, Issue 4, e003842
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i4.3842

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing Royal Malaysian Police Branding Strategy Through Public Perception: A Mixed-Method Approach

Muhammad Amin Bin Ibahrim[1*], Khairul Aidil Azlin Abd Rahman[2], Velu Perumal[3]

[1]Department of Industrial Design, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Selangor, Malaysia
Email: ASPAminpaper@outlook.com
[2]De Institute of Creative Arts and Design, UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur Campus, No. 1, Jalan Menara Gading, UCSI Heights (Taman Connaught), 56000 Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: KhairulAidilAzlin@ucsiuniversity.edu.my
[3]De Institute of Creative Arts and Design, UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur Campus, No. 1, Jalan Menara Gading, UCSI Heights (Taman Connaught), 56000 Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: velu@upm.edu.my

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):
Muhammad Amin Bin Ibahrim (ASPAminpaper@outlook.com)

KEYWORDS:
Royal Malaysia Police
Public Perception
Branding
Public Trust
Communication
Security

CITATION:
Muhammad Amin, I., Khairul Aidil, A. A. R., & Velu, P. (2026). Developing Royal Malaysian Police Branding Strategy Through Public Perception: A Mixed-Method Approach. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH), 11*(4), e003842. https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i4.3842

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the key challenges faced by the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), specifically how public perception influences their efforts in developing a strong branding strategy. The research objectives were to i) examine the current branding approach implemented by PDRM, ii) assess public perception of police service delivery before developing a branding strategy, and iii) develop a branding strategy for PDRM to ensure that police service delivery aligns with the customer charter. Based on Aaker, service quality, and organisational identity branding theories, a mixed-method research design, comprising quantitative and qualitative phases, was applied in this study. The samples comprised 400 members of the public, 20 PDRM officers and 10 expert reviewers, including academics, NGO representatives, and communication professionals. Data collection entailed a self-administered survey and structured interviews. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics and bivariate analysis. Meanwhile, trends and gaps in PDRM's branding efforts and the proposed branding strategies were identified via qualitative analyses. The findings revealed several important insights. Urban communities emphasise the need for efficient digital communication and transparency in PDRM's operations, while rural communities tend to evaluate police services based on interpersonal relationships and police presence within their communities. The proposed branding strategies include enhancing the use of social media to deliver clear and consistent messaging, strengthening community engagement initiatives, and improving police officer training in interpersonal communication. This proposed branding model may help PDRM enhance public trust and cooperation, thereby supporting the institution's branding objectives in alignment with its customer charter.

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Contribution/Originality: This study is the first attempt to use a mixed-method design in understanding PDRM's branding practices, challenges faced and public perception about policing services provided by this critical arm of national security. The proposed branding model may help PDRM enhance public trust and cooperation, thereby supporting the institution's branding objectives.

1. Introduction

History has shown that one of the defining features of a sovereign nation is its ability to guarantee the safety of its citizens and territory. In a democratic system, the constitution serves as a guide to ensure individual rights and freedoms (Cleavy & Arku, 2014). Human rights play a vital role in socioeconomic development, culture, the right to life, freedom, and societal well-being (Kenyon et al., 2018).

Strategic policing is a critical element in safeguarding the rights of citizens. As an enforcement agency, the police are responsible for upholding the law, maintaining public order, and administering justice (Dempsey & Forst, 2013). The effectiveness of police services directly impacts national security by reducing crime rates and enhancing public confidence in law enforcement. Ineffective police services can threaten national stability. A study by the American Crisis Research Centre (CSRC, 2010) revealed that weak law enforcement opens the door to internal and external security threats, as observed in failed states like Somalia and Zimbabwe. These countries often lack security structures and are prone to chaos and civil disorder.

In Malaysia, policing dates back to the Portuguese occupation in 1511. During that time, the *Temenggung* was tasked with apprehending criminals, enforcing punishments, and maintaining security in ports, markets, and residential areas (Mohamed & Rahman, 2020). That role has since evolved into a modern and professional police force that caters to the nation's growing security needs. The Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) now faces global challenges that demand transformation in its efforts to enhance national security. Public perception of PDRM plays a crucial role in determining the force's effectiveness and public trust. Integrity and accountability among officers are foundational in earning this trust. According to Sipalan (2015), PDRM scored distinctly high in terms of public satisfaction with their service delivery in 2014, evidenced by 54% of respondents who were "somewhat satisfied" and 38.6% who claimed to be "very satisfied". Other scholars obtained contradicting results, as 75% of Malaysians, especially the educated respondents, reported low satisfaction levels toward police job performance (Azyanee et al., 2013). In Selangor, only one-third (38.8%) of respondents were satisfied with the police performance rating. Selvanathan et al. (2016) posited that the government need to put in more efforts to improve personnel attitudes and reforms in the job. In Putrajaya, respondents perceived that the level of reliability and responsiveness of police services was moderate. Two factors, competency and manners, had a significant influence on perceived reliability levels. Therefore, public perception of safety and police efficiency remains a challenge that needs to be addressed (Ishak, 2016; Mohd Syafiq Mat Saruji et al., 2018).

Today, people access and share information more easily. The mass media significantly influence how news is delivered about politics, society, religion, and the economy. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp allow for

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borderless communication. However, each piece of information consumed shapes public perceptions and becomes a topic of discourse (Zamli, 2014). In recent years, internal misconduct in PDRM has attracted serious attention. In the first half of 2024, 1,760 investigation papers were opened regarding misconduct among PDRM personnel—an increase from the previous year. The Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Razarudin Husain, reiterated that there would be no compromise for officers involved in misconduct. Weak supervision has been cited as a contributing factor, alongside integrity and criminal offences among certain personnel. This surge in misconduct cases has raised concerns about PDRM's credibility and integrity in the public eye. Serious action is required to restore public trust.

In 2000, PDRM established a counselling program under the Religious and Counselling Division (BAKA), offering officers a platform to share their concerns. However, these programs are insufficient and must be complemented by holistic initiatives. Police performance is closely evaluated based on officers' skills and responsiveness to both internal and external challenges, which influence public assessments of the institution. To address growing misconduct issues, PDRM established the Integrity and Standards Compliance Department (JIPS) on July 25, 2014. JIPS oversees internal investigations of misconduct involving senior and junior officers. This department integrates elements from various units— the Integrity Secretariat, BAKA, and oversight branches—under a centralised structure focusing on integrity and compliance. JIPS initiates disciplinary investigation papers (KST) when there is sufficient evidence of criminal conduct. Accused officers will have statements recorded and may be suspended and reassigned pending further action.

The researcher selected PDRM for this study due to its frequent presence in public discourse and criticism. The force's reputation is increasingly tarnished by ethical violations and criminal cases such as abuse of power, corruption, excessive force, and property crimes. According to Zukifar (2023), a strong branding strategy not only helps build a positive image but also enhances public confidence in the services provided. Therefore, it is essential to develop a branding strategy framework aligned with PDRM's customer charter.

This study aims to develop an effective branding strategy for the PDRM by gaining a deep understanding of public perception. The primary goal is to improve the quality of interaction between the police and the community. The specific objectives were to examine the (1) current branding approach implemented by the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), (2) analyze the quality of public perception regarding PDRM's service delivery, and 3) Develop a strategic branding plan for PDRM to ensure that police service delivery is aligned with its customer charter. Aligning with the research objectives, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

i. What current branding practices are implemented by PDRM in delivering police services to the public?
ii. How does the quality of public perception influence the evaluation of police service delivery by PDRM?
iii. How can a newly developed branding strategy for PDRM ensure that police services align with the customer charter?

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2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research follows an exploratory design to assess the current branding strategy of PDRM and how it influences public perception. Specifically, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys and interviews, to collect empirical data on factors influencing public perception of PDRM (Dowler, 2003).

Mix-methods design provides the researcher with additional insights and legitimates multiple validities (Johnson and Christensen, 2020), which otherwise may not be covered by using a single technique. This method also assists in supporting the use of multiple approaches for any study by synthesising many choices for the researchers, making the investigation more robust and meaningful (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Thus, the dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both measurable perceptions and deeper insights into PDRM's branding challenges and opportunities.

2.2. Study Location

The study was conducted across various zones in Malaysia: Northern Zone (e.g., Perlis, Kedah), Central Zone (e.g., Selangor, Kuala Lumpur), Southern Zone (e.g., Johor), Eastern Zone (e.g., Terengganu, Kelantan) and East Malaysia (e.g., Sabah, Sarawak). Both urban and rural communities were included to ensure a broad representation of public opinion. Locations were selected based on diversity in demography, crime rates, and proximity to police facilities.

2.3. Study Population and Sampling

The population includes the general public (Malaysian citizens aged 18 and above), PDRM officers, community leaders and civil society representatives. As for the sampling methods, we used a stratified random sampling for public respondents to reflect regional and demographic diversity. Meanwhile, purposive sampling was employed for expert interviews and PDRM personnel. The sample sizes comprised 400 members of the public, 20 PDRM officers and 10 expert reviewers such as academics, NGO representatives, and communication professionals.

The required sample size for the quantitative survey was estimated by using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, based on the recommendations for a finite population, a margin error level of 5% and 95% confidence level. Thus, 385 participants were estimated as the minimum required sample size. This was further increased to 400 upon adjusting for 10% non-response rate. As for the qualitative survey, the sample size was based on the recommendations by Ahmed (2025), whereby a minimum of 20-25 respondents was considered appropriate to attain saturation across qualitative research such as phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography.

2.4. Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study include a structured questionnaire, interview guides, observation checklists and document analysis templates. The survey instrument was designed using Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions, comprising four sections,

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namely Section A (Demographic data), Section B (Public perception of PDRM), Section C (Elements of public perception of PDRM) and Section D (Research recommendations). Meanwhile, the interview entailed semi-structured expert interviews.

Community programs and branding activities were assessed as components of the observation checklists, while PDRM brochures, websites, and available reports constituted the document analysis. All instruments were validated through a pilot test and reviewed by academic experts to ensure clarity and relevance.

2.5. Pilot Testing

To ensure the credibility of findings, a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents to refine the questionnaire. Expert validation was obtained for instruments (face and content validity). Reliability of questionnaire items was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (> 0.70 accepted). Interview questions were peer-reviewed and pilot-tested for clarity.

2.6. Data Collection Methods

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to members of the public across selected regions in Malaysia. According to Kevin Lyons (2015) and Jackson (2003), a sample of 200 provides an acceptable margin of error. The questionnaires were either self-administered or via an online Google form after contacting the respondents. Efforts were made to keep a diverse sample distribution; hence, respondents' geographic location (urban/rural), age group, ethnicity, and gender were considered during the selection process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 PDRM officers and 10 experts, including academics, NGO representatives, and communication specialists. The interview topics included current branding practices, public engagement challenges, and suggestions for future branding strategies. As for the document review, the documents included PDRM brochures, social media pages, annual reports, and customer service charters. These methods assessed alignment between PDRM's public messaging and public perception. Lastly, field observations were conducted at PDRM events and police stations to assess officer conduct, physical branding presence and public interaction strategies.

Overall, 250 responses were collected via manual forms and 250 respondents via online platforms. These diverse data collection methods were important to ensure the diversity and accuracy of the data collected. Data validation check was implemented to ensure that only complete and relevant respondents were included. In total, 450 valid responses were successfully collected, resulting in a robust sample for comprehensive analysis.

2.7. Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaires were analysed using SPSS, specifically descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and Cronbach's Alpha to assess the reliability of the scales. Interview and observation data were coded and analysed thematically using NVIVO or manual content analysis. The key themes included integrity and image, service responsiveness, communication effectiveness, and public trust factors. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing the data from different sources, thereby enhancing the validity and identifying consistent patterns.

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2.8. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (JKEUPM) Universiti Putra Malaysia, with the reference number: JKEUPM-2024-1063. The approval letter is attached as a supplementary document (Refer to supplementary file). In addition, the research followed ethical research principles, including informed consent by briefing all participants regarding the research purpose and obtaining their signed consent forms. To ensure voluntary participation, respondents could withdraw at any time. Respondents' names and personal information were anonymised for confidentiality. Information was securely stored and used only for academic purposes. Permission was obtained from relevant authorities, including PDRM, to conduct interviews and access documents.

3. Results

3.1. Respondents' Demographic Profile

A total of 400 members of the public participated in the survey. Overall, 56% of the respondents were females and 44% were males (Table 1). The predominant age group was 30-44 years old at 41%, followed by 18–29 years (28%), 45–59 years (24%), whereas only 7% were aged 60 years and above. In terms of ethnicity, 62% were Malay, followed by Chinese at 18%, Indian at 13% and other ethnic groups at 7%. Two-thirds of the participants were from urban locations compared to 30% from rural settings. These results reflect a diverse and representative sample of Malaysian society.

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profile

Characteristics	Categories	Percentage (%)
Jantina	Male	48.4
	Female	51.6
Age	18-25	8.7
	26-30	13.1
	31-35	13.1
	36-60	50.4
	60 and above	14.7
Education	Post-graduate	14.4
	Diploma/STPM	57.6
	SKM	25.6
	Others	2.4
Occupation	Civil servant	36.2
	Private sector	38.6
	Self-employed	24.2
	Retired	8.0
	Student	15.3
	Housewife	4.7
Race	Malay	35.8
	China	25.1
	India	18.4
	Sabah & Sarawak	18.0
	Lain-lain	2.7
Total	450	100

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3.2. Public Perception of PDRM

Table 2 depicts participants' responses to questions regaring their perception of PDRM branding. The items with the highest mean score (4.98) were values and confidence, indicating that public's trust in PDRM plays a major role in shaping an organizational image. Communication skills (4.92), personality (4.90), image (4.87) and branding strategy (4.86) were also identified as important factors in building a stronger PDRM brand. Meanwhile, the scores for the design of the PDRM logo (4.62) and slogan (4.68) were relatively lower, but still relevant in supporting branding efforts.

An unhealthy work environment received the highest mean score (5.00) when it comes to the factor with the most significant negative impact on PDRM branding. In addition, respondents perceived that the failure to effectively rebrand PDRM will increase negative stigma towards the organization (4.98) and tarnishing the image in the long run (4.97). Loss of public trust in PDRM (4.97), decrease in job applications (4.94) and a decrease in PDRM personnel morale (4.87) indicated the importance of branding in building public confidence.

Overall, elements related to values, communication, and the personality of PDRM members are more influential in shaping a brand that is trusted and respected by the public. Without branding efforts, morale and work culture in the organization can be affected, and PDRM's reputation in the eyes of the public will decline.

3.2.1. Elements of Public perception of PDRM

Although most respondents felt scared (4.88) and safe (4.87) when dealing with PDRM members. Assertiveness (4.81) and confidence (4.74) also scored high, reflecting respect and trust. However, there was also a feeling of resentment (4.56) among some respondents, while happiness recorded the lowest score (4.24). Overall, interactions with PDRM members were more positive

The majority of respondents have a positive perception of PDRM. Quick response to the public recorded the highest score (4.95), followed by soliciting bribes (4.94) and performing duties effectively in combating crime (4.93), indicating confidence in the efficiency of this team. In addition, quality service to the public (4.88) and treating the public fairly (4.84) also indicated confidence in the professionalism of the PDRM. However, preserving the fundamental rights of the public received the lowest score (4.56), reflecting mixed views on this aspect.

The aspects that need the most attention in PDRM branding are the current PDRM branding and the PDRM slogan, both of which recorded the highest score (5.00). This shows the importance of strengthening the overall image of the organization. In addition, the PDRM vision/mission (4.99) and customer program (4.89) also received high attention, reflecting the need to maintain clarity of direction and good relations with the community. The PULAPOL module (4.95) and organizational structure (4.88) also showed importance in shaping the PDRM identity. Aspects such as PDRM functions (4.60) and PDRM emblem (4.67) recorded lower scores but still showed importance in branding. Overall, the main emphasis was on branding strategy, clear communication, and relations with the community.

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The main importance of PDRM branding was creating a more positive identity, which recorded the highest score (4.99). This shows that branding plays an important role in shaping the public's perception of PDRM. In addition, improving credibility and integrity and public trust each obtained high scores (4.98), indicating that good branding can strengthen public confidence in this security force. Quality of service (4.98) and maintaining dignity and professionalism (4.96) are also important factors in strengthening the image of PDRM.

The greatest potential to have an impact on the PDRM branding process are values and confidence, which recorded the highest score (4.98). This shows that the public's trust in PDRM plays a major role in shaping the image of the organization. In addition, communication skills (4.92) and personality (4.90) also recorded high scores, proving that the interaction aspects and the way PDRM members relate to the public greatly influence public perception. Image (4.87) and branding strategy (4.86) are also important factors that help build a stronger PDRM brand.

3.2.2. Current PDRM Branding Practices

Survey and document analysis revealed key insights. Regarding visual Identity and symbols, 84% of respondents recognise the PDRM logo, but only 39% understand its symbolic meaning. Uniforms and patrol vehicles were perceived as important markers of legitimacy, especially in rural areas. In terms of social media presence, 72% of respondents follow or have encountered PDRM on platforms such as Facebook or TikTok. However, only 35% opined that the content is engaging or informative. Overall, the content was perceived as too formal and lacking relatability.

Only 28% of respondents reported having participated in a PDRM-led community program, thus reflecting their low participation in community engagement programs. Interview data with officers suggest that outreach is limited by staffing, funding, and public interest. Despite the presence of internal branding efforts, interviews with officers revealed a lack of structured branding training. Most officers equate branding with “wearing a uniform properly” rather than embodying organisational values. Document analysis revealed an inconsistency in branding tone and message across states. Overall, PDRM has some branding infrastructure in place, but lacks strategic integration and officer-level branding awareness.

3.2.3. Public Perception of PDRM’s Service Delivery

The findings on how the public perceives PDRM’s service delivery. Public perception was examined through five key themes drawn from the SERVQUAL model: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Tangibles entail facilities, appearance, and visibility. Most respondents (77%) agreed that PDRM officers appear neat and professional in public. However, only 42% felt that police stations were physically clean and welcoming. Rural respondents expressed concerns over the lack of signage and infrastructure, making stations less approachable.

Reliability refers to the PDRM’s ability to provide consistent and accurate service. Approximately half of the respondents (53%) posited that PDRM can be relied upon for crime response. However, one-third (34%) were dissatisfied with how prior police reports or complaints were followed up. For instance, interviewees mentioned cases being “closed” without detailed updates to complainants.

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Table 2: Participants' responses to items relating to perception and branding of PDRM

Items	**Yes**	**No**			
The need to rebrand PDRM	424 (94.2)	26 (5.8)			
Perceived quality of the brand	425 (94.4)	25 (5.6)			
		Item (mean values)			
How can you identify an individual you see as a member of the Royal Thai Police?	Accessory (4.76)	Appearance/decoration/style (4.48)	Vehicle (4.90)	Logo/Identity (4.90)	Character (4.58)	Uniform (4.88)
How would you feel if you were confronted by PDRM members?	Felt scared (4.88)	Safe (4.87)	Assertiveness (4.81)	Confidence (4.74)	Resentment (4.56)	Happiness (4.24)
What is your perception of PDRM officers	Quick response to the public (4.95)	Soliciting bribes (4.94)	Performing duties effectively in combating crime (4.93)	Quality service to the public (4.88)	Treating the public fairly (4.84)	Preserving human rights (4.56)
In your opinion, what aspects need to be focused on in PDRM branding?	PDRM slogan (5.00)	PDRM Mission/vision (4.99)	Customer program (4.89)	PULAPOL module (4.95)	Organizational structure (4.88)	PDRM functions (4.60), PDRM emblem (4.67)
Why is PDRM branding important?)	More positive identity (4.99)	Credibility, integrity and public trust (4.98)	Quality service (4.98),	Maintaining Dignity and professionalism (4.96)	Creating good relations with the public (4.89)	Attracting public interest (4.88)

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What elements have the potential to have an impact on the PDRM branding process?	Values and confidence (4.98)	Communication skills (4.92)	Personality (4.90)	Image (4.87)	Branding strategy (4.86)	Design of PDRM logo (4.62) and PDRM slogan (4.68)
What are the consequences if PDRM branding is not done?	Unhealthy work environment (5.00)	Negative stigma increases (4.98), Tarnished image of PDRM (4.97)	Loss Of Public trust in PDRM (4.97)			

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2026, Volume 11, Issue 4, e003842
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i4.3842

As for responsiveness, which is PDRM's speed and willingness to help, only 39% agreed that PDRM responded quickly to emergency calls or public inquiries. During the interviews, respondents described delays of over 30 minutes in urban areas and even longer in rural areas. Nevertheless, 46% agreed that officers showed interest in resolving their concerns.

Assurance in this study embedded professionalism, competence and courtesy. Most respondents (61%) affirmed that officers appeared confident and knowledgeable during interactions. In contrast, only 45% felt that officers communicated clearly and respectfully, especially at service counters. Interview data suggests that younger respondents were more critical of tone and communication style.

The last construct in the SERVQUAL model, empathy, focuses on personalised attention and concern. One-third of the respondents (33%) agreed that officers made efforts to understand their individual problems. Most respondents (42%) felt interactions were brief and lacked emotional sensitivity. Notably, victims of crimes such as theft or domestic violence expressed frustration at "robotic" or cold treatment.

3.2.4. Trust

The quantitative phase also explored public trust regarding PDRM's service delivery. Overall, 22% expressed "high trust" levels compared to 48% who demonstrated "moderate trust" levels, and 30% reported "low or no trust". Thus, almost one-third of respondents had no trust in PDRM. Further analyses revealed that significantly higher trust levels ($p<0.05$) were demonstrated by older respondents and those with positive personal interactions with PRDM officers. Negative perceptions were strongest among youth and those influenced by viral social media content. Respondents ranked the factors influencing their trust in PDRM, with the social media posts and viral content receiving the highest ranking, followed by word of mouth from family and friends, personal experiences and new coverage (i.e., TV, radio, and newspapers). In summary, respondents exhibited mixed perceptions of PDRM, with strengths in appearance and professionalism, but weaknesses in perceived fairness, empathy, and responsiveness.

3.3. Emerging Themes

The interviews focused on assessing current branding challenges and developing a future branding strategy for PDRM.

3.3.1. Lack of Structured Branding Strategy

All 10 experts agreed that PDRM lacks a centralised or strategic branding plan. Officers confirmed that branding is not part of their formal training or key performance indicators (KPIs). An example of the quote from a senior officer (SO4) is shown below:

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> *"There is no briefing on branding. We're trained to enforce the law, not to promote an image."* (SO4)

3.3.2. Inconsistent Communication Style

Experts noted that PDRM's public messaging is inconsistent across regions and departments. While some officers use overly formal language, others attempt humour, which may sometimes be counterproductive. This finding is reflected in the following comment:

> *"The tone must be humanised—professional but empathetic. The current messaging sounds robotic or cold."* (Experts, E6)

3.3.3. Reactive Crisis Management

Both officers and experts observed that PDRM often reacts late to public controversies. There is no unified digital crisis team, leading to delays and mixed messages. Thus, both respondents recommended establishing a digital crisis response team and training spokespersons in real-time public relations management. Some of the corresponding comments are provided below:

> *"I think we have to be more proactive in responding to issues concerning our image in the public. This problem is connected to the absence of a centralised digital system to facilitate quick response". (SO12)*

> *"We don't have a unified digital crisis team, so you can see where the delayed response is emanating from. Even the officers are not well-trained in public relations" (SO8).*

3.3.5. Underutilization of Social Media

While PDRM has active Facebook and TikTok accounts, experts opined that the content lacks engagement value. Officers affirmed that they lack digital communication training and are unsure what "professional yet relatable" content means. This theme is reflected in the following comment:

> *"I post what I think is helpful, but there's no guideline. Sometimes, our videos get shared—but sometimes we get scolded." (SO12).*

3.3.6. Community Engagement Challenges

Officers expressed frustration with low public turnout at community policing events. Experts emphasised the need to rebrand these activities with more appealing formats, such as family-friendly events, dialogues with youth, and mobile apps for feedback.

> *"The response and turnout to community events organised by our team is not encouraging; a lot of improvement is needed. New methods to rebrand the events for better engagement with the public." (SO4).*

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> *"We have to introduce new formats and methods of rebranding policing activities. For example, make it more family and public-friendly and interact with the younger population." (SO9)*

> *"Comments from the public can be used in improving our rebranding approaches. Maybe we can try using mobile apps to collect such comments." (SO12)*

3.3.7. Misalignment Between Branding and Ground-Level Practice

Experts emphasised that branding cannot be separated from officers' behaviour. The public evaluates PDRM not just through slogans or videos, but through how officers treat them in everyday situations. One of the critical comments presented by a senior officer is shown below:

> *"Your logo means nothing if the officer at the counter is rude. Branding starts with behaviour." (SO10).*

In summary, the interview findings highlight the need for an integrated branding strategy that includes internal training, unified communication, and a people-first approach.

4. Discussion

The present study is the first attempt to use a mixed-method research design in understanding PDRM's branding practices, challenges faced and public perception about policing services provided by this critical arm of national security. Public perception is mixed, with strengths in terms of appearance and authority but weak when it comes to empathy, responsiveness, and personal engagement. These findings are consistent with prior reports from local studies, whereby the public perception of police image was moderate with diverse views toward police job performance and their service delivery (Azyanee et al., 2013; Sipalan, 2015). Problems relating to the lack of empathy, personal engagement and responsiveness were equally raised by respondents surveyed by Selvanathan et al. (2016), Ishak et al. (2016) and Saruji et al. (2018) in different areas in Selangor and Putrajaya. Thus, given the large sample size of respondents recruited in the present study from different regions in Malaysia, the findings reflect a more generalised problem regarding the negative perception of the public towards PDRM.

Public perception of the police force remains a fundamental imperative and concern in several countries worldwide, including the UK and the USA (Javid & Morell, 2019; Maese & Lloyd, 2023). Aligning with the recommendations by prior researchers (Selvanathan et al., 2016; Saruji et al., 2018), PDRM needs to look inwards and develop effective strategies to mitigate these issues that shape public perception of safety and police efficiency.

Another important finding is the low proportion of respondents (22.0%) who expressed high trust in PDRM, while 30% reported low or no trust at all in the security agency. This result can be linked to public perception of PDRM, which plays a crucial role in determining the force's effectiveness and public trust. Integrity and accountability among officers are foundational in earning this trust (Albrecht, 2019). People are more likely to have greater trust in police when they feel being treated with procedural justice and crime is effectively tackled (Sargeant et al., 2017).

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Moreover, trust encompasses evaluations and expectations of personal experiences with the local police or individual officers. Public perceptions and trust in policing can be either undermined or enhanced by various levels of police visibility, perceived decline in availability, shifts in perception of fair treatment of different groups, and perceived readiness to attend incidents (Merry et al., 2012). Similar events seem to shape the Malaysian public perception in the present study as the major drivers included personal experience, word-of-mouth and social media influences. Public perceptions can be shaped either by positive or negative contact with the police. Public opinions are more likely to be adversely affected following negative experiences or contacts with the police, and these forms of negative encounters are more influential than positive encounters (Miller & D'Souza, 2016).

In this study, younger respondents and urban populations were more critical and sceptical about PDRM's image and service delivery compared to older respondents and those from rural settings. This finding is among the first attempts to assess socio-demographic factors influencing the Malaysian public perception of PDRM. Numerous studies conducted worldwide have demonstrated the influence of socio-demographic factors on public perception and attitudes toward the police (Garduno & Keeling, 2021; Yesberg & Bradford, 2021). Our results corroborate a study in the UK (Sindall et al., 2017) whereby older children depicted lower levels of confidence in police, with the outcome reducing by approximately 20% for every annual increase in age. Likewise, Merry et al. (2012) found significantly lower confidence among respondents aged 18-29 years old relative to other age groups. The researchers linked this finding to the lower likelihood of older people being recent victims of crime, thereby shaping their perception positively. Other possible explanations include the positive association between the ageing process and heightened conservatism and integration into the institutional order, contrary to young individuals who tend to perceive police as restricting their independence, thereby evaluating the entire police force unfavourably (Ren et al., 2005; Hanway & Hambly, 2023).

The study found that while PDRM has basic branding elements, particularly visual identifiers (e.g., logo, uniform), it lacks an integrated branding strategy. This finding falls short of Aaker's branding theory (1996), which emphasises consistency in identity, communication, and behaviour across all touchpoints. The problem was further complicated by the fact that most officers were unaware of branding principles, viewing them as unrelated to their core duties. Thus, PDRM's brand and its effectiveness were impaired by inconsistent visual and messaging standards across different police departments. Branding is not incorporated into officer training or performance evaluation. In addition, PDRM's social media content often lacked emotional appeal or failed to reflect current issues that matter to the public, particularly the younger population. These findings are consistent with international practices that highlight the importance of coordinated digital engagement (Men & Stacks, 2013).

The present findings reveal a clear gap between PDRM's customer charter values and the public's actual experience. While the charter emphasises principles such as integrity, responsiveness, and professionalism, these values are often not consistently demonstrated in public interactions. Branding experts and PDRM officers agreed that a new strategy must involve both internal transformation and external communication. This supports the Organisational Identity Theory (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), which states that an institution's external image is rooted in internal identity and culture. If officers do not understand or embody branding values, the public cannot be expected to perceive

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them. Moreover, different communities are usually defined by their socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts, meaning factors that promote or limit collaboration with the police differ from group to group (Brewster et al., 2018).

Based on the research findings, a branding strategy framework comprising five core pillars was proposed for PDRM in this study: internal alignment, unified visual and verbal identity, people-centred communication, social media engagement strategy, and crisis management control. The first pillar entails incorporating branding into officer training by defining branding responsibilities in officers' KPIs and conducting workshops on integrity, empathy, and public communication. This is based on the fact that these aspects of officer conduct were critical in shaping public perception about PDRM. International studies have also shown how training that targets the synthesis of procedural justice skills, such as active listening and perspective-taking methods, impacts positively on policing, evidenced in lower levels of force usage and a reduction in public complaints (Gibbs et al., 2021).

The next approach looks into standardising all PDRM's logos, slogans, signage, uniforms, and written communication, as well as creating branding guidelines for state and district-level PDRM units. A strong and standardised corporate identity helps the public immediately recognise and relate to the organisation. Appearance in the service and standardised corporate identity have been shown as core areas in shaping police image in numerous countries, as reported in recent studies conducted in Sweden (Vaitkevičiūtė & Dobržinskienė, 2022) and the UK (Duran et al., 2019). Such branding approaches extend to training officers and communication staff in strategic messaging, usage of clear, empathetic, and inclusive language in all public messages, and empowering community liaisons to manage local feedback. This is because appearance in service goes beyond physical outlook to how police officers engage and interact with the public. In the long run, a well-established people-centred communication can be reached, which will help in enhancing and sustaining PDRM's brand.

In terms of social media engagement and crisis management control, the two branding strategies are interlinked because of the immense impact of social media on the public's view of the organisation during a crisis. Social media remains a key component in strategic messaging and shaping the public's view of PDRM. Social media has become a double-edged sword for PDRM. While it can serve as a powerful branding and outreach tool, it also **a**mplifies public criticism and exposes misconduct, increasing the speed at which negative narratives spread and creating pressure for real-time responses and accountability.

Communication, engagement, collective efficacy and working with the community are drivers of public policing perceptions (Hanway & Hambly, 2023; Labata, 2024). These essential aspects of policing and improving police brand requires a cohesive digital strategy as shown in recent studies conducted in the Phillipines (Labata, 2024), whereby enhanced police visibility, community outreach program, first responders in calamities, and proactive information campaigns were identified as approaches to promote public trust and confidence in police activities. PDRM risks losing control of its public narrative. Unofficial posts, insensitive comments, or delayed responses on social platforms can damage credibility.

In conclusion, this study revealed that PDRM has established basic branding elements but still lacks a cohesive and strategic branding framework. The underutilization of social

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media and proliferation of formal, outdated and unengaging content also constitute a major setback to PDRM's branding. In addition, the available community programs are inconsistent and limited in reach. Branding is not incorporated into officer training or performance evaluation. These issues are reflected in public perception of PDRM's services, characterised by mixed findings with positive views in terms of appearance and authority but weak in key areas such as personal engagement, empathy and responsiveness. More than half of the respondents had moderate to no trust in police services, with the major perception drivers being social media, personal experience, and word-of-mouth. These negative opinions and critical views were more common among younger respondents and urban populations.

Based on the aforementioned findings, this study proposes a branding strategy aligning with the PDRM Customer Charter. Key stakeholders posited that PDRM's branding must go beyond visuals by reflecting daily behaviour and institutional culture. Overall, the recommended focus areas include officer training in communication and branding, a unified social media strategy with localised content, and clear response protocols during crises.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Ethics Committee for Research involving Human Subjects of University Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) with the reference number: JKEUPM-2024-1063. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Acknowledgement

Part of this article was extracted from a doctoral thesis submitted to University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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