AL-TANZIM
Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam
e-ISSN : 2549-5720
p-ISSN : 2549-3663

**Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam**
Vol. 09 No. 04 (2025) : 1382-1398
Available online at https://ejournal.unuja.ac.id/index.php/al-tanzim/index

# Branding Strategies for Strengthening the Identity of Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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DOI: http://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v9i4.12470

| *Received: 26 August 2025* | *Revised: 10 November 2025* | *Accepted: 01 December 2025* |
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**Abstract:**

This study aims to examine how Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) maintain their Islamic identity and institutional character amid the currents of digitalization and global competition through the implementation of brand image strategies. This research uses a qualitative case study approach, employing observation, interviews, and document analysis. The results indicate that PTKI successfully built a brand image by constructing a unique institutional narrative with distinct characteristics, strengthening networks through leaders, lecturers, and alums, and optimizing the use of digital media for communication and to broaden the institution's awareness. Furthermore, a comprehensive evaluation was conducted to assess the strategy's effectiveness. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of PTKI actively adapting to the demands of the times, without losing its ideological roots and traditional values. The implications of this research broaden the understanding of the application of brand image strategies in building institutional image, as well as the role of public networks in strengthening the existence of higher education in the digital era.

**Keywords:** *Islamic Identity, Digitalization, Global Competition, Brand Image*

**Abstrak:**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengulas bagaimana Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam (PTKI) mampu mempertahankan identitas keislaman dan karakter institusionalnya di tengah arus digitalisasi dan kompetisi global, melalui penerapan strategi citra merek (brand image). Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis studi kasus, melalui observasi, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa PTKI berhasil membangun citra merek melalui konstruksi narasi kelembagaan yang khas dengan karakteristiknya, penguatan jejaring melalui pimpinan, dosen, dan alumni, serta mengoptimalkan penggunaan media digital sebagai sarana komunikasi dan pengenalan institusi secara luas. Selain itu, evaluasi yang menyeluruh digunakan sebagai tolak ukur efektivitas strategi. Temuan penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya PTKI untuk beradaptasi secara aktif terhadap tuntutan zaman, tanpa kehilangan akar ideologis dan nilai tradisionalnya. Implikasi penelitian ini memperluas pemahaman tentang penerapan strategi citra merek dalam membangun citra institusi, serta peran jejaring publik dalam memperkuat eksistensi pendidikan tinggi di era digital.

**Kata Kunci:** *Identitas Keislaman, Digitalisasi, Kompetisi Global, Brand Image, Citra Merek*

***Please cite this article in APA style as:***

Arsyadana, A., Indrioko, E. (2025). Branding Strategies for Strengthening the Identity of Islamic Higher Education Institutions. *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, *9*(4), 1382-1398.


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## INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought significant disruption to the world of higher education, which is faced with the demands of maintaining its relevance amidst the current wave of modernization (Destari & Kusumawati, 2023). However, few studies have examined how Islamic identity is integrated into branding strategies. In the context of these changes, Islamic higher education institutions are required not only to be technologically adaptive but also to maintain their distinctive Islamic values and identity consistently. One of the main strategies in maintaining the relevance of competitive institutions is strengthening brand image (Rachman, et al., 2025). In the digital era, brand image is formed through direct and indirect interactions through channels such as social media, websites, and advertising (Elhajjar & Yacoub, 2024).

In this context, Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) have a dual role in building an authentic image. They must be able to translate these values into relevant and communicative digital language.

A brand image strategy is essential to maintaining PTKI's relevance in the modern era. Brand image reflects the public's perceptions and beliefs about a brand, shaped by their information and experiences with the entity (Parris & Guzmán, 2023). Through a brand image constructed both conventionally and digitally, PTKI can attract prospective students, increase trust, and strengthen the institution's position amidst increasingly competitive competition (Amelia & Tambunan, 2024; Sari & Sylvia, 2020). This initiative represents a concrete effort by PTKI to remain relevant and maintain its Islamic traditional roots (Destari & Kusumawati, 2023). By embracing Islamic values as the primary foundation of the institution's image, PTKI can strengthen its institutional identity, attractiveness, and maintain its relevance in the digital era.

The importance of brand image strategy in the digital era for PTKI lies not only in its ability to integrate technology with institutional identity but also in the increasing public demand for transparency, accountability, and integrity in digital communications (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024; Elhajjar & Yacoub, 2024; Khoiroh et al., 2025; Syafika & Marwa, 2024). However, expansion into the digital space also carries the risk of excessive commercialization that can erode the religious values, traditions, and moral commitments that are fundamental to PTKI (Juhaidi, 2024; Saputra & Aras, 2023). This tension between digital modernization and religiosity remains underexplored in the PTKI branding literature, making this research relevant to understanding how institutions can build an innovative brand image without losing their spiritual and cultural Authenticity.

Digital transformation opens new opportunities to shape brand image through a more adaptive, dynamic approach. Online presence strategies such as search engine optimization (SEO), social media utilization, and content management can be used to increase institutional exposure (Raya, 2025). At the same time, activities such as online seminars, open public lectures, and engagement in social issues are part of an events strategy that strengthens the image of an active and responsive institution (Ghorbanzadeh & Sharbatiyan,

2024). Digital-based public relations strategies, such as collaborating with religious leaders and disseminating Islamic values, are effective in increasing emotional closeness between institutions and communities (Istyanto et al., 2025; Maulana et al., 2025).

Most previous studies have focused on general marketing strategies in the education or business sectors, without considering the unique values of religious institutions (Boros & Papasava, 2020; Solberg & Durrieu, 2022). Even in the realm of Islamic higher education, research remains limited in examining the elements of approaches, methods, and evaluation mechanisms used to build a brand image rooted in Islamic values (Ali et al., 2021; Kismawadi & Syahril, 2025). This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) build a brand image through approaches, methods, and strategic evaluations aligned with the characteristics of Islamic higher education. Specifically, this study contributes by constructing an integrative model of Islamic branding that combines narrative strengthening, institutional networking, and digital optimization, thereby offering a more comprehensive framework than previous research.

This research uses an innovative approach to develop a brand image strategy for Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI), a context rarely studied in depth amid modernization. In an era of increasingly fierce competition, shaping an institution's image is no longer limited to visuals or logos; it is about how the institution constructs a strong institutional narrative, builds networks, and optimizes the use of credible, valuable digital media. Nielsen et al. (2025) emphasizes that institutions must have a grand narrative that can be disseminated to the public as part of the trust-building process. In this context, brand image is a social construct formed through interactions between the institution and the public, particularly through strategic digital media.

This study utilizes a multi-case approach at two institutions, namely UIT Lirboyo Kediri and Universitas Islam Kadiri, to analyze the branding strategies implemented by two models of PTKI that differ in their institutional characteristics. UIT Lirboyo is firmly rooted in Islamic boarding school (pesantren) traditions, whereas Universitas Islam Kadiri represents a more adaptive, modern, and open institutional model. These contrasting characteristics provide a strong analytical foundation for comparing how each institution constructs, articulates, and communicates its identity to the public in the digital era.

The originality of this study lies in its effort to develop an integrative understanding of Islamic higher education branding by linking institutional identity, digital communication practices, and strategic evaluation. Furthermore, this research argues that effective brand image development in PTKI requires not only narrative consistency and cultural Authenticity but also adaptive digital engagement that aligns with contemporary public expectations. Thus, this study not only describes the strategies employed but also evaluates their effectiveness in building a strong, credible, and contextually relevant brand image in today's competitive educational landscape.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative case study design (Leko et al., 2021) and a multi-case approach across two Islamic higher education institutions: Tribakti Lirboyo Islamic University, Kediri, East Java and Kadiri Islamic University, Kediri, East Java. This approach was chosen to explore in depth the brand image-building strategies implemented by both institutions and their relevance in the digital age. In this context, the researchers sought to compare and understand the phenomena in the context of each university studied. A total of six key informants were selected through purposive sampling: the rector, vice-rector 1, vice-rector 3, lecturers, and alums directly involved in or knowledgeable about branding practices. The research was conducted over seven months to ensure adequate depth of data collection and analysis.

In addition, institutional documents, strategic plans, and digital media policies were examined holistically to understand the orientation of institutional branding in facing contemporary challenges (Taherdoost, 2022). All data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Miles et al., 2014), which involved several systematic stages: data reduction through initial coding, category development, and theme identification; data display through matrices and narrative charts; and conclusion drawing supported by cross-case integration. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, documents, and field observations, as well as member checking with key informants. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail documenting analytical decisions and reflective notes. Through this rigorous analytical process, the study seeks to uncover effective practices and challenges in building a strong and credible institutional brand image.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

This study examines the branding strategies of two Islamic Higher Education institutions (UIT Lirboyo and Universitas Islam Kadiri) to strengthen their relevance in the digital era. Using a qualitative, multi-case study method, this research will identify PTKI brand image strategies, such as building institutional narratives, the role of institutional networks, institutional events, the use of digital media, and comprehensive evaluations (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Strategy for Building PTKI Brand Image**

**Building an Institutional Narrative**

Institutional narratives play a crucial role in shaping the identity and public perception of higher education institutions, especially in the digital era, which is rife with image competition. These narratives form the foundation for building a higher education institution's brand image. In the context of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI), institutional narratives are more than just slogans; they serve as ideological epicenters, deeply rooted in the values that define these institutions.

UIT Lirboyo emphasizes its institutional characteristics as a higher Islamic boarding school (pesantren), focusing on strengthening Islamic morality and scholarship. This identity is reflected in its official narrative, found on its website and social media platforms. The vision of UIT Lirboyo is clear: "Excellence in Islamic studies, Indonesian-ness, Islamic boarding schooling, and science from the perspective of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah Islam." The institution's logo features Islamic symbols, including the Kaaba, a pen, and wing feathers, all steeped in meaning. The head of the institution asserts that the education provided at UIT Lirboyo is known for its strong ties to the values of the Lirboyo Islamic boarding school, and that its brand is that of an "Islamic boarding school college."

In addition to its ideological narrative, the institution's commitment to excellence in religious studies further strengthens its brand image. The Head of LP2M highlights that some of UIT Lirboyo's lecturers and educational staff are community leaders who frequently engage in social dynamics. "When lecturers are invited by the community, it creates a brand image for the institution, showing that our lecturers are highly regarded for their religious knowledge," said the head of LP2M.

On the other hand, Kadiri Islamic University (UNISKA) is developing a more modern and inclusive institutional narrative with the slogan "Excellent in Quality." A lecturer from UNISKA explained, "We have opened five faculties and frequently showcase these faculties to the community, highlighting their quality, or as you call it, our brand image." UNISKA's identity is shaped by a professional approach, with a focus on academic achievement and universal Islamic values. Their vision is to become a university that adheres to internationally applicable education standards by 2033, producing human resources who excel in science and technology, possess an Islamic fighting spirit, and have entrepreneurial skills.

This modern narrative is evident in UNISKA's digital communications, which emphasize academic success, quality improvement, and student engagement. The public relations bureau states, "UNISKA strives to provide the best service in formal Islamic higher education, preparing students who are knowledgeable in both religious and general fields." One lecturer added, "We are improving the quality of this institution from various perspectives, including teaching staff, curriculum content, student competencies, facilities, and infrastructure. This effort has led to an increase in student enrollment and A-level accreditation in several study programs." UNISKA's narrative focuses on professionalism and modernity, in contrast to UIT Lirboyo's more traditional

Islamic boarding school identity. These differing narrative approaches—UIT Lirboyo's pesantren-rooted identity versus UNISKA's contemporary, professional approach—highlight how each institution builds a differentiated brand that aligns with their values and strategic positioning in the digital era.

**Table 1. Differences in Institutional Narratives**

| | UIT Lirboyo Kediri | Kadiri Islamic University |
|---|---|---|
| **Slogan** | *"Perguruan Tinggi Pesantren"* | *"Excellent in Quality"* |
| **Narrative** | Excellent in the fields of Islamic studies, Indonesianism, Islamic boarding schools, and science from the Islamic perspective of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah | To become a university that refers to SNPT to produce human resources who master science and technology in their fields, have an Islamic fighting spirit and entrepreneurship. |
| **Target** | Known as a center for Islamic education and guardian of Islamic traditions | Known as a competitive and adaptive Islamic campus |

The findings indicate that building institutional identity at both PTKIs is not the same; rather, it is more context-specific. Each institution develops a strategic narrative based on values perceived as its core strengths. Such strategies serve as a crucial foundation for shaping public perception and establishing institutional differentiation amidst increasingly competitive higher education environments.

**The Role of Institutional Networks (Leaders, Lecturers, and Alumni)**

In the context of Islamic Religious Higher Education (PTKI), the formation of an institutional image depends not only on the institutional narrative but also on internal actors such as lecturers and alumni, as well as institutional networks formed outside the campus. Findings at UIT Lirboyo Kediri indicate that the power of these networks is strongly felt through close ties with Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in East Java. This network creates a strong perception (branding) that UIT is a university that is part of the Islamic boarding school-based scientific and spiritual ecosystem in East Java. The Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School Community Network (Jejaring Masyayikh) further strengthens this public perception. As the Vice Rector II stated, "I think the people of East Java and the surrounding areas are already familiar with the education we provide. We frequently collaborate with various Islamic boarding schools to send letters regarding new student registration so that their graduates are willing and happy to continue their studies here" (IW-01-JF).

Regarding the networks of the community and leadership, both with government officials and religious leaders, the head of LP2M added, "The kyais from East Java also often visit here. Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School has a very large network and influence, meaning it has a strong appeal in the community. So, Lirboyo has a network with various community organizations, and the campus benefits from that" (IW-02-ZA). He further emphasized, "The harmonious relationships between them create a brand image for Tribakti campus. This means that campus leaders, who are also public figures, interact with government officials and religious leaders in the surrounding Kediri area".

The campus's lecturers and alumni play a significant role in strengthening the institution's branding, as their active involvement in community, religious, and educational activities naturally positions them as "living brochures" for UIT Lirboyo. Lecturers who also serve as preachers often introduce the Tribakti campus during their sermons, indirectly promoting the university while fulfilling their religious duties. Many students come from families or communities already connected to UIT through siblings, relatives, or alumni who recommend the institution. This reflects how social networks and community trust contribute organically to the institution's public image. As the rectorate head mentioned, "The lecturers, who are also preachers, are often asked to mention the Tribakti campus during their lectures. While giving their lectures, they also promote education at this campus to some extent. Furthermore, many students' parents, younger siblings, or older siblings graduate to replace their younger siblings, and many alumni invite their relatives or neighbors to attend" (IW-01-JF).

This shows that the branding process at UIT Lirboyo is deeply embedded in its social ecosystem, where lecturers and alumni function not as formal marketing agents but as authentic community representatives who reinforce the institution's identity. Meanwhile, Kadiri Islamic University (UNISKA) relies on a strong network of foundation leaders and alumni who have been active in various sectors, including government institutions, business, and community organizations. Through an interactional approach, UNISKA consistently maintains communication with all public organizations. The general chairman of the Bina Cendekia Muslim Pancasila Foundation (the foundation that oversees UNISKA), Kiai Anwar Iskandar, wields significant influence among public figures throughout Indonesia. The Head of Administration stated, "Kiai Anwar Iskandar himself is a prominent figure in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI), and the head of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI). His prominent figure indirectly fosters interaction with other public organizations, which fosters the perception that he has an educational institution that is diligently managed and produces outstanding graduates" (UW-02-MA).

Lecturers' personalities also play a crucial role in the campus branding strategy, which helps strengthen the campus's brand image in the public's eyes. According to the Public Relations Bureau, "Thank God, some lecturers are also involved in organizations and have influence in the communities where they live. This is quite encouraging, in the sense that individual lecturers constitute the brand image for the institution where they teach" (UW-01-RM). Alumni and government officials are also strategically used in branding efforts to introduce UNISKA to the broader public. This is considered a powerful source of institutional image, particularly through collaboration in various campus activities. As one lecturer explained, "We have invited alumni and government officials (regional and national), religious and community leaders to graduation ceremonies, campus birthdays, Islamic holiday commemorations, building inaugurations, seminars, and other events. Therefore, our approach to them is a way to introduce the institution individually" (UW-03-RN).

The involvement of these figures demonstrates that UNISKA's branding strategy relies not only on formal media but also on the social capital and symbolic networks possessed by influential individuals. Their presence in various campus activities strengthens the institution's legitimacy while broadening the reach of its messages to the public. UNISKA's reputation is built not only through academic achievement but also through interpersonal relationships that foster emotional closeness and public trust. This strategy makes UNISKA's branding more effective by leveraging the credibility of public figures to strengthen its positive image across various levels of society.

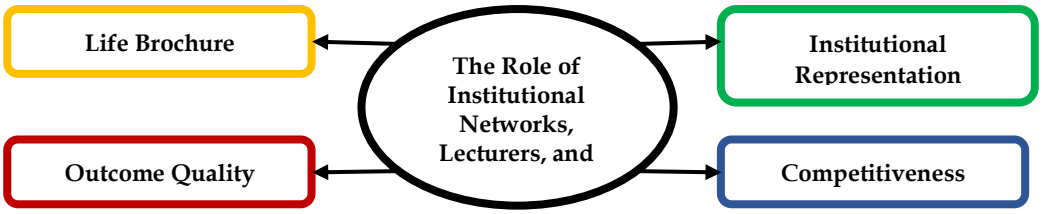


**Figure 2. The Role of Networks**

The image above demonstrates the strategic role of institutional networks, lecturers, and alums. Both UIT Lirboyo and UNISKA demonstrate that networking, lecturer contributions, and alum visibility are all organic strategies for strengthening brand image. Networking is not simply defined as connections, but rather as part of the institution's life narrative, conveyed through the personal and professional roles of its leaders and academic community. Therefore, the brand image strategy is not solely focused on managerial matters; it also considers the central roles (Leadership, lecturers, and alums) in disseminating the institution's image to the public.

**Branding Through Institutional Events**

Efforts to build and strengthen the brand image of higher education institutions can also be achieved through institutional events. In this context, events are not merely ceremonial or academic activities but also a platform for brand building, network expansion, and the strengthening of institutional identity. Based on field findings, it was found that UIT Lirboyo Kediri and Universitas Islam Kadiri both use events as branding tools, but with different approaches and levels of intensity.

At UIT Lirboyo, regular events are held with Islamic and Islamic boarding school themes. Activities such as student community service programs (KKN), workshops, seminars, and large-scale religious study groups (pesantren) are the primary (direct) means of demonstrating the institution's distinctive character to the public. Therefore, these activities serve as a primary medium for publicly disseminating the distinctive values of Islamic boarding schools. The Vice Rector II stated: "Activities that engage with the community, such as KKN, graduation ceremonies, workshops, seminars, and large-scale religious study groups, have also been held on campus, attended by large audiences." (IW-01-JF)

UIT Lirboyo organizes its activities through programs such as the Community Service Program (KKN), which plays a crucial role in building the

institution's image and recognition in the community. Students deployed to various regions not only conduct academic activities but also assist the community with religious and social activities. Through roles such as serving as imams, lecturers, TPA/TPQ mentors, and leading religious activities such as Yasinan (recitation of the Yasin) and Tahlil (recitation of the tahlilan), students directly demonstrate the pesantren's values and religious competence, which are UIT Lirboyo's hallmarks. These interactions create real-life experiences for the community, reinforcing the perception that UIT Lirboyo is an institution oriented not only toward formal education but also toward social contributions grounded in Islamic values. Thus, the KKN program serves as a strategic medium for expanding networks, strengthening the pesantren's identity, and increasing public trust in the institution. The Head of LP2M stated: "We deploy students to regions to serve in religious studies. They share their religious knowledge with the community. They serve as muezzins or preachers for Friday prayers, teach Quran recitation (TPQ/Madin), lead Yasin and Tahlil recitations, and lead istighosah (Istighosah) recitations. Essentially, they serve the community, and the community is very happy" (IW-02-ZA).

On the other hand, UNISKA organizes events that are more focused on direct interaction with the community. Events such as graduation ceremonies, campus anniversary celebrations, new student admissions, and religious holiday celebrations facilitate the instilling of identity and the conveyance of messages. A lecturer who served as an informant stated: "In building the institution's brand, we interact directly with the target audience (parents, guardians, and the community). Activities include, for example, meetings with guardians at new student admissions, graduation ceremonies, istighosah (religious prayer) gatherings, and large-scale religious study groups" (UW-03-RN).

Through institutional events and programs, UNISKA ensures that information about the institution, including its competitive advantages and specific messages, is conveyed effectively. This is in line with what another lecturer stated: "These activities are more impactful, allowing the community to better focus on what we convey. These face-to-face meetings foster a closer connection between us and the community, creating an emotional bond between the campus and the community" (UW-04-KR).

**Table 2. Institutional Event Branding**

| | UIT Lirboyo Kediri | Kadiri Islamic University |
|---|---|---|
| **Fokus Event** | Strengthening Islamic boarding school values through student KKN, religious studies, and seminars | Public interaction through graduation, istighosah, and student guardian meetings |
| **Strategic Approach** | Cultivating identity through religious-based service (direct interaction) | Brand recognition through emotional connections in institutional events (direct interaction) |

In this context, both institutions use events as a medium to disseminate information and strengthen their identities, employing narrative styles that reflect the unique characteristics of each university to the public. In general, the messages and efforts to introduce their identities, both UIT Lirboyo and UNISKA, in this context, emphasize direct interaction with the community

through programs and events. This is claimed to instill the university's brand image in the public eye.

**Use of Digital Media**

In addition to event and networking strategies, which typically use direct methods, optimizing the use of digital media is an indirect way to build a brand. This is a crucial tool in the brand image strategy of PTKI (Institute of Islamic Education and Training), especially in the digital era. Social media, websites, and other internet platforms are the primary channels for disseminating institutional narratives, expanding networks, and strengthening public perception. Findings from the field show that both UIT Lirboyo Kediri and Universitas Islam Kadiri (UNISKA) use digital media in their brand image strategies, but with different approaches.

UIT Lirboyo promotes its institution through digital media (the internet), which is seen as both cost-effective and efficient. The content presented covers student admissions, academic activities, Islamic narratives, institutional activities, and student-related information. During the research, the Vice Rector II and the Head of LP2M stated: "We use internet media for institutional publications, marketing, and/or building public image of the institution" (IW-01-JF). The main platforms used include the website, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Vice Rector II emphasized, "Due to the rapid changes in technology, especially in information and communication, we must keep up with them. Therefore, the website, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp status updates are ways to introduce the institution to the wider public."

The institution's website serves primarily as a formal medium for information. "To introduce the campus to the wider public, we have an official website, sir. The Tribakti website also contains campus information, student announcements, and our programs" (IW-02-ZA). This approach ensures that the institution's digital presence is accessible and informative, providing essential details about its activities and offerings.

Meanwhile, UNISKA takes a more systematic and professional approach to digital media. The institution uses various social media platforms to disseminate institutional information, reaching diverse regions in a cost-effective manner. Ms. Rahmanti explained, "We use electronic media channels or social media. We document our programs or activities, and then disseminate them via the internet, radio, or television" (UW-01-RM). This method enables UNISKA to maintain a strong digital presence, showcasing their programs and activities effectively across multiple platforms.

The use of digital media is particularly strategic in promoting new student admissions. Advances in information technology have transformed how people search for and verify information about higher education institutions, making a campus's digital presence vital for attracting prospective students. Through platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and an official website integrated with the academic information system, UNISKA can quickly, broadly, and effectively reach prospective students and their families. The content—ranging from academic announcements, student activities, alumni testimonials, to

institutional achievements—encourages positive perceptions of the university's credibility and quality. As one lecturer mentioned, "Even though children are teenagers, parents influence their children's college choices. They seek information about institutions for their children to attend. Therefore, we utilize information and communication technology to disseminate information to the wider community." UNISKA's active presence on social media platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, alongside a website integrated with the academic system, strengthens the institution's brand and visibility.

**Table 3. Use of Digital Media**

| | UIT Lirboyo Kediri | Kadiri Islamic University |
|---|---|---|
| **Function** | A means of Islamic publication, academics, and promotion of Islamic boarding school value-based institutions | Strategic tools for professional service promotion and information |
| **Platform** | Website, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp | Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Website, radio, televisi |
| **Communication Style** | Religious, simple, focused on Islamic boarding school values | Modern, systematic, adaptive to public needs |

Based on the above findings, both UIT Lirboyo and UNISKA utilize platforms such as websites and social media to strengthen their institutional image, reach audiences, and efficiently disseminate institutional information. Both emphasized that digital media is a vital channel for public communication and institutional marketing. Therefore, the use of digital media is a crucial indirect strategy in building the brand image of Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) in the digital era.

**Comprehensive Evaluation**

Through comprehensive evaluation, the consistency and effectiveness of the brand image strategy at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) can be maintained. Evaluation not only serves as a tool to measure program success but also as a reflection of the alignment between the institution's identity and the public perception it forms. At Tribakti Islamic University (UIT) Lirboyo, evaluations are conducted through routine and ad hoc forums at the rectorate level, as well as through SWOT analysis. Evaluations also aim to reaffirm the campus's identity as an "Islamic boarding school." This was conveyed by the Vice Rector II of UIT Lirboyo, who stated: "We plan, implement, and evaluate these targets. Evaluation is a tool for us to ensure that the institution's targets are on target. Especially regarding the institution's brand, namely 'Islamic boarding school,' we consistently uphold this principle or slogan." (IW-01-JF)

This statement demonstrates that evaluation at UIT Lirboyo is not merely an administrative activity. However, an integral part of the quality control mechanism is to ensure that every strategy, including the institution's branding as an Islamic boarding school-based campus, is on track. Commitment to the Islamic boarding school identity is a key indicator continuously monitored in

every evaluation process. To support this, the institution implements a rigorous, multi-layered coordination framework between Leadership and relevant units, so that any developments can be promptly followed up through structured evaluation forums.

IAIT's strength lies in its network of Islamic boarding school alums, which serves as an alternative channel for disseminating branding information, rather than relying solely on social media. The Head of LP2M stated: "For example, sir, we feel that communicating the institutional brand 'Islamic boarding school' through social media is ineffective... therefore, the solution is to send the information to the HIMASAL alumni association." (IW-02-ZA)

Meanwhile, UNISKA Kediri implements a systematic evaluation approach based on continuous monitoring. Evaluation not only monitors program achievements but also analyzes gaps between plans and implementation for immediate follow-up. In an interview, the UNISKA Public Relations Bureau stated: "Every program implemented is evaluated... each program is always examined one by one to determine whether it has been successful or not. Evaluation on this campus is for continuous improvement." (UW-01-RM). In line with this, one lecturer also stated: "Evaluation is mandatory for us to measure program achievements... especially regarding our branding as an institution that presents itself to the wider community as excellent in quality." (UW-06-EB).

**Table 4. Brand Image Strategy Evaluation**

| | **UIT Lirboyo Kediri** | **Kadiri Islamic University** |
|---|---|---|
| **Focus** | Maintaining the consistency of Islamic boarding school identity through internal and alumni forums | Structured monitoring to maintain the image of a professional institution |
| **Approach** | Routine and incidental forums, based on institutional values and culture | Systematic and continuous evaluation based on program achievements and plans |
| **Objectives** | Affirming its position as a "*boarding school*" | Ensuring quality of service and maintaining the branding of "*excellent in quality*" |

The above explanation demonstrates that PTKI's brand image strategy requires a mechanism for contextual evaluation to ensure alignment between institutional identity and public perception. IAIT Lirboyo emphasizes consistency of Islamic boarding school values through alum channels and internal forums, while UNISKA adopts a structured evaluative approach to maintain the institution's professional image. These findings underscore the urgency of integrating continuous evaluation in building a brand image that adapts to social dynamics and digital developments.

## Discussion

This study examines the branding strategies of two Islamic Religious Universities (PTKI) in Indonesia, Tribakti Islamic University (UIT) Lirboyo and Kadiri Islamic University (UNISKA), in the digital era. The main findings indicate that each institution adopts a strategy that aligns with the brand image dimensions outlined by Kotler and Keller (2016), encompassing four main

aspects: advertising, public relations, online presence, and events. However, this study attempts to incorporate the managerial dimension (evaluation) as a phase that measures the effectiveness of the strategies used. Both institutions utilize this approach more contextually, while still reflecting their unique characteristics.

Through a constructed institutional narrative, consisting of a vision, slogan, or jargon with specific characteristics, it will become a brand identity inherent to the institution (Hasanah et al., 2023; Spry et al., 2020). Islamic higher education institutions can build their narratives based on their institutional background, whether Islamic boarding schools, traditional, adaptive, or modern. This research supports the idea that institutional networks have a significant impact on an institution's image and reputation across research collaboration, institutional development, and reputation (Uwizeye et al., 2022). Both UIT Lirboyo and UNISKA build and strengthen networks through an interactional approach, involving leaders, academics, lecturers, and alums. These findings fill a gap in the literature on the role of institutional identity and networks in building brand image, particularly in higher education.

Brand image strategies through events or programs are relevant to several previous studies (Boros & Papasava, 2020; Saputra & Aras, 2023), which have proven effective in promoting institutional excellence. An open approach through seminars, webinars, large-scale religious studies, and graduation ceremonies will facilitate the public's branding of Islamic higher education institutions. Furthermore, Islamic higher education institutions (PTKI) can optimize social media as an online presence strategy by being active on these platforms. Providing content with institutional information will further open up opportunities for the public to learn more. This strategy fully implements the four dimensions of Kotler and Keller's (2016) brand image strategy and, by extension, challenges the stereotype that PTKIs are not adaptive to technology and professional public communication in cyberspace. Călina (2025) state that strengthening an institution's image is strongly influenced by consistent narratives and communications to support that identity.

In this context, a comprehensive branding strategy can be an additional aspect within Kotler and Keller's (2016) framework, helping measure strategy effectiveness. This aligns with the characteristics of both institutions, which are based on Islamic religious higher education. The findings of this study support a values-based branding approach integrated into institutional communication (Ambarwati & Sari, 2024; Khoiroh et al., 2025; Maulana et al., 2025), while also expanding Kotler and Keller's branding framework to the context of religious-based higher education, which has not been widely discussed in the literature. As stated by Ambarwati (2024), the identity of Islamic higher education institutions requires adjustments to their distinctive religious culture in branding strategies. This study enriches the still-limited literature discussing branding within the PTKI environment, especially in the context of digitalization and a multi-case approach.

The results of this study highlight how Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) can maintain their Islamic identity and institutional character amid the currents of digitalization and global competition by implementing brand image strategies. These strategies include building institutional narratives, strengthening networks, optimizing digital media for communication and broad institutional recognition, and conducting comprehensive evaluations as benchmarks for strategy effectiveness. These findings enrich the literature on branding Islamic educational institutions by demonstrating that PTKI can actively adapt to the demands of the times, without losing its ideological roots and traditional values. Therefore, this study contributes to broadening the understanding of the application of brand image strategies in Islamic higher education, as well as opening up space for the development of branding theory and practice in the context of other faith-based institutions in the digital era.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) strengthen their brand image in the digital era through four key strategies: constructing distinctive institutional narratives, mobilizing networks of leaders, lecturers, and alums, optimizing digital media as a communication and promotional tool, and conducting comprehensive evaluations to ensure alignment between institutional identity and public perception. Both Tribakti Islamic University Lirboyo and Kadiri Islamic University demonstrate that brand image building is most effective when institutional values—whether pesantren-based or modern-adaptive—are translated consistently into communication practices and public engagement. These findings show that PTKI can adapt to digital transformation without compromising its ideological roots or religious traditions.

Scientifically, this study contributes to expanding the discussion on brand image strategies in religious-based higher education institutions by integrating institutional narratives, networking roles, and evaluative mechanisms into the branding framework—elements that have been largely underexplored in previous literature. However, this research is limited to two case study sites and relies primarily on qualitative data, which may not fully capture variations across different PTKI contexts. Future studies may explore larger samples, comparative analyses across regions, or quantitative approaches to examine more precisely how institutional narratives and networks influence the effectiveness of branding strategies in Islamic higher education.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We want to express our deepest gratitude to Tribakti Islamic University (UIT) Lirboyo and Kadiri Islamic University (UNISKA) for the opportunity to conduct this research. We would also like to thank the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Syekh Wasil State Islamic University of Kediri for their support and contribution in completing this research.

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