



---

**Branding Strategies of Educational Institutions in Increasing the Interest of Applicants:  
A Case Study of Ma'had Uthman bin Affan**

**Muhammad Hirsan Wahyudi<sup>1\*</sup> and Muammar<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Indonesia

*\*Corresponding author: [irsan7484@gmail.com](mailto:irsan7484@gmail.com), [muammar@uinmataram.ac.id](mailto:muammar@uinmataram.ac.id)*

**Keywords:**

Brand management, Islamic education, institutional branding, educational marketing, case study, institutional strategy

**ABSTRACT**

This research examines the integrated branding strategies employed by Ma'had Uthman bin Affan, a premier Islamic educational institution in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, to increase applicant interest and institutional competitiveness. Using a descriptive qualitative case study methodology, we conducted in-depth interviews with institutional leaders, marketing personnel, and alumni, supplemented by documentary analysis and institutional data. Findings reveal four interconnected primary branding strategies: (1) Islamic value-centered brand identity construction, (2) strategic and consistent social media engagement and digital marketing, (3) institutionalized alumni networks functioning as brand ambassadors, and (4) continuous educational quality improvement as tangible brand proof. The institution achieved a 68.4% increase in applicants over the 2021–2025 period, with accelerating growth trajectories in recent years. Theoretically, findings align with Aaker's brand equity framework, demonstrating that integrated brand management transcends marketing communication to encompass organizational culture and service delivery excellence. The research contributes to educational marketing theory by establishing that value-based differentiation combined with authentic service quality creates sustainable competitive advantage in Islamic educational markets. Results have significant implications for institutional leaders seeking to strengthen market positioning while maintaining spiritual and academic missions. The study recommends that Islamic educational institutions adopt comprehensive integrated brand management approaches positioning Islamic values as central competitive differentiation mechanisms.

## 1. Introduction

Higher education markets in Indonesia and Southeast Asia have undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, characterized by substantial growth in institutional proliferation, demographic shifts in student populations, and intensifying competition for qualified applicants (Ketteringham & Soh, 2019; Maringe & Foskett, 2012). The Indonesian higher education landscape specifically has expanded from approximately 300 institutions in 2000 to over 4,600 registered institutions by 2024, representing a compound annual growth rate of 4.2% (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024). This expansion has fundamentally altered institutional competitive dynamics, compelling educational institutions to develop sophisticated market positioning strategies to differentiate themselves and attract quality applicants (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

Within this competitive landscape, Islamic educational institutions face distinctive market pressures and strategic imperatives. Islamic higher education institutions must simultaneously maintain religious authenticity and value alignment while meeting contemporary pedagogical standards and student expectations (Muhaimin, 2016; Machali & Hidayat, 2016). This dual mandate creates unique branding challenges distinct from secular institutional contexts. Research indicates that parental decision-making regarding Islamic educational institutions involves complex value-balancing between spiritual development, academic quality, and institutional prestige, factors rarely emphasized with equal weight in secular educational contexts (Siti Irene Astuti, 2011; Mulyasa, 2012). Consequently, marketing and branding approaches effective for mainstream universities may prove inadequate or misaligned with stakeholder expectations in Islamic educational markets.

Ma'had Uthman bin Affan (hereinafter referred to as "the institution"), located in East Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara Province, represents a pedagogically innovative Islamic educational institution established in 2017. The institution integrates traditional Islamic boarding school pedagogy with contemporary academic curricula, operating under the auspices of the Al-Khairat Islamic Education Foundation. Over its seven-year operational history, the institution has experienced substantive institutional growth, with applicant numbers increasing from 187 (2021/2022 academic year) to 315 (2024/2025 academic year), representing a 68.4% growth trajectory. This expansion occurred during a period of market saturation and increased competitive intensity in regional educational markets, suggesting the effectiveness of the institution's strategic positioning and market approach.

Notwithstanding substantial scholarly attention devoted to higher education marketing, branding, and institutional positioning in Western contexts (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Chapleo, 2015), the academic literature on branding strategies specifically addressing Islamic educational institutions remains limited and underdeveloped. Most existing educational branding research focuses on secular universities in developed economies or emphasizes generic marketing functions applicable across institutional contexts (Alves & Raposo, 2010). Research specifically examining how Islamic educational institutions construct brand identities, leverage religious-cultural values as market differentiation mechanisms, or integrate spiritual mission with institutional brand strategy remains substantially under-addressed in scholarly discourse (Muhaimin, 2016). This knowledge gap is particularly pronounced regarding case-based research demonstrating practical implementation of branding strategies in non-Western Islamic educational contexts. Additionally, few empirical studies examine how Islamic educational institutions leverage digital marketing platforms and alumni

networks to achieve market positioning objectives, despite these mechanisms' apparent importance in contemporary educational markets.

From a theoretical perspective, existing brand equity frameworks—notably those developed by Aaker (1996) and Keller (2013)—while comprehensive in scope, were developed primarily through analysis of commercial product and service brands in Western consumer markets. Their applicability to religious and educational institution contexts in non-Western societies remains underexplored. Theoretical questions arise regarding whether and how existing brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty) operate similarly in Islamic educational institution contexts where value-based differentiation and spiritual mission constitute primary institutional functions rather than supplementary organizational attributes. Furthermore, the interaction between institutional service quality, stakeholder experiences, and brand perception in Islamic educational contexts remains theoretically underspecified.

The practical significance of this research extends beyond the specific case institution. As Islamic educational institutions across Indonesia and Southeast Asia navigate intensifying competitive pressures, institutional leaders lack contextually-grounded evidence regarding effective branding strategy implementation. Educational administrators require empirically-derived insights into how to construct market-competitive institutional positions without compromising religious authenticity or educational mission. Particularly in the post-pandemic context where institutional sustainability depends increasingly on stable applicant flows and revenue generation, understanding effective branding mechanisms has taken on elevated practical importance (UNESCO, 2020).

Against this contextual and theoretical backdrop, this research addresses four interconnected research questions: (1) What branding strategies has Ma'had Uthman bin Affan deliberately implemented to achieve institutional positioning and enhance applicant interest? (2) How do institutional actors perceive the effectiveness and appropriateness of these branding strategies relative to organizational mission? (3) What measurable outcomes have resulted from these branding strategy implementations? (4) What theoretical insights emerge from the case regarding brand management in Islamic educational institution contexts? These research questions align with calls in the literature for contextualized, qualitative investigations of institutional branding in non-Western educational markets (Maringe & Foskett, 2012).

This manuscript proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, we present our methodological approach, emphasizing research design rigor, data collection protocols, and analytical procedures ensuring findings' credibility and trustworthiness. Subsequent sections present a comprehensive theoretical framework contextualizing brand management within organizational strategy literature, followed by detailed findings regarding the four primary branding strategies the institution employs. Our discussion section interprets these findings within existing theoretical frameworks while identifying novel theoretical insights and practical implications. The conclusion synthesizes key findings and articulates recommendations for institutional leaders and future researchers investigating branding in Islamic educational contexts. We anticipate this research contributes meaningfully to educational management literature by demonstrating how institutions can construct market-competitive positions while maintaining value-centered organizational missions—a particularly important contribution for the growing number of faith-centered educational institutions globally.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### ***2.1 Brand Equity Framework***

Brand equity, conceptualized as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to brand marketing efforts, provides the foundational theoretical framework for this investigation (Keller, 2013). Aaker's (1996) seminal framework identifies four primary dimensions of brand equity: (1) brand awareness—extent to which prospective consumers recognize and recall the brand; (2) perceived quality—consumer assessment of the institution's overall excellence relative to competitors; (3) brand associations—constellation of positive attributes, values, and experiences consumers connect to the brand; and (4) brand loyalty—propensity of consumers to continue selecting the brand despite competitive alternatives. Applied to educational contexts, brand equity dimensions operate similarly: prospective students and parents develop awareness of institutions, form quality perceptions based on reputational signals and direct experiences, develop associational connections linking institutions to specific values or outcomes, and demonstrate loyalty through institutional selection and advocacy (Alves & Raposo, 2010).

### ***2.2 Institutional Branding as Strategic Management***

Contemporary branding scholarship increasingly emphasizes that brand management transcends marketing communication to constitute integral organizational strategy (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Chapleo, 2015). From this perspective, branding functions as mechanisms through which organizations align organizational culture, operational practices, service delivery, and external communication around coherent value propositions (de Chernatony, 2001). In educational institutional contexts, effective branding requires alignment between marketed institutional identities and actual organizational practices, values demonstrated through institutional actions, and educational experiences students genuinely encounter (Alves & Raposo, 2010). This strategic integration perspective suggests that branding effectiveness depends not primarily on marketing sophistication but on organizational authenticity—the degree to which institutional communication accurately represents institutional reality and core values (Williams & Spiro, 1985). Organizations attempting to construct brand identities misaligned with actual organizational practices experience brand degradation through stakeholder experience-based perception correction (Chapleo, 2015).

### ***2.3 Value-Based Differentiation in Religious Institutional Contexts***

Religious and value-centered organizations operate within distinctive competitive environments compared to profit-maximizing commercial entities (Bauer et al., 2008). For faith-based educational institutions, brand differentiation mechanisms operate partially through value-centered positioning rather than purely functional or quality-based differentiation (Machali & Hidayat, 2016). Parents and students selecting Islamic educational institutions often prioritize value alignment—ensuring institutional practices reflect Islamic principles—alongside conventional educational quality criteria. Research indicates that in value-centered organization contexts, brand loyalty demonstrates heightened persistence compared to functionally-differentiated brands, as value-centered consumers experience stronger psychological identification with aligned organizations (Sargeant, 2005). This value-centered loyalty mechanism suggests that Islamic educational institutions employing Islamic value-positioning strategies may experience more stable competitive positions and resilient applicant bases than institutions competing purely on functional educational quality grounds.

## ***2.4 Digital Marketing and Social Media in Educational Institution Branding***

Digital marketing platforms, particularly social media, have fundamentally transformed institutional brand communication dynamics, particularly for institutions targeting younger demographics (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media enables institutions to communicate directly with prospective students, bypassing traditional gatekeepers, while simultaneously permitting prospective students to access peer-generated content and authentic institutional information (Constantinides, 2014). For educational institutions, social media communication serves multiple strategic functions: brand awareness building, reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and community development (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Research demonstrates that institutions employing strategic social media approaches achieve higher brand awareness and more favorable brand perceptions among digital-native student cohorts compared to institutions relying primarily on traditional marketing channels (Sago, 2013). The visual and narrative dimensions of social media content—particularly Instagram's emphasis on aesthetic visual storytelling—create distinctive opportunities for institutions to communicate institutional culture, student experiences, and institutional values in emotionally resonant formats.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### ***3.1 Worldview and Research Paradigm***

This research operates within an interpretivist worldview, grounded in the epistemological position that social reality is constructed through stakeholder meanings, interpretations, and interactions rather than existing as objective independent phenomena (Creswell, 2014). Interpretivist approaches privilege understanding how organizational actors construct meaning regarding institutional branding strategies, perceive strategic effectiveness, and experience organizational identity. This worldview directly aligns with research questions requiring comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives regarding branding strategy implementation and effectiveness in a specific institutional context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interpretivist paradigm mandates qualitative methodological approaches emphasizing rich contextual data, stakeholder voice, and emergent understanding rather than hypothesis testing.

### ***3.2 Research Design: Descriptive Qualitative Case Study***

This research employs a descriptive qualitative case study design, selected for its particular appropriateness in examining institutional branding strategies within specific organizational contexts (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Case study methodology enables in-depth investigation of complex social phenomena—institutional branding strategy implementation and effectiveness—within natural organizational settings while maintaining contextual richness (Stake, 2005). The descriptive case study approach prioritizes detailed, comprehensive description of phenomena rather than comparative analysis across multiple cases, permitting profound understanding of how branding strategies operate within particular institutional contexts and contingencies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Ma'had Uthman bin Affan constitutes the bounded system of analysis, with temporal boundaries encompassing the 2021–2025 period capturing recent strategic implementation and applicant growth trajectories. The case's selection reflects purposeful sampling logic: the institution demonstrates exceptional applicant growth during a competitive market period, exhibits sophisticated institutional brand positioning, and represents an understudied context—Islamic educational institutions in regional Indonesian settings—in educational marketing literature.

### **3.3 Data Collection Procedures and Participants**

Data collection occurred across a six-month period (January–June 2024) employing triangulated methods integrating primary and secondary data sources. Primary data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposefully-selected key informants representing diverse organizational perspectives: institutional leadership (rector and vice-rectors, n=3), marketing and public relations personnel (n=4), student affairs staff (n=2), and alumni representatives and brand ambassadors (n=6), totaling 15 key informants. Interview participants possessed direct knowledge of and responsibility for branding strategy implementation and could articulate institutional strategic rationales and perceived outcomes. Semi-structured interviews, conducted in Indonesian with average duration of 60–90 minutes, employed interview protocols guiding conversation while permitting emergent exploration of topics raised by participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Secondary data collection encompassed institutional documents (n=23), including strategic plans, marketing materials, annual reports, student recruitment data, social media analytics, and organizational communications. Direct observation of institutional environments, conducted across five institutional visits totaling 40 hours, provided contextual understanding of how brand identity manifested through physical campus design, visual communications, and organizational culture. Observational data were recorded through detailed field notes emphasizing visual environmental design, institutional symbolism, and stakeholder interactions observable within institutional settings.

### **3.4 Data Analysis Framework**

Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) framework, comprising three iterative analytical phases. In the data condensation phase, transcribed interviews, observational field notes, and documentary texts underwent systematic open coding, creating descriptive labels capturing essential meaning units. Initial codes (n=87) emerged inductively from data without predetermined conceptual frameworks, preserving empirical grounding in participants' meanings and institutional realities. Second, codes underwent axial coding where thematically-related codes clustered into broader analytical categories, with relationships between categories specified. This process yielded seven intermediate categories. Third, selective coding involved identifying overarching conceptual themes connecting intermediate categories while integrating theoretical frameworks relevant to categorical meanings. Four primary strategic theme clusters emerged corresponding to research-identified branding strategies.

Data display involved creating thematic matrices and conceptual maps visually organizing analytical relationships, facilitating pattern identification and theoretical integration (Miles et al., 2014). Conclusion drawing employed systematic comparison of identified patterns against theoretical frameworks (Aaker's brand equity model, institutional strategy literature, value-based differentiation theory) to identify theoretical resonances and novel insights. Qualitative data analysis employed NVivo 14 software supporting systematic coding, memoing, and analytical organization across large data volumes.

To enhance analytical credibility and trustworthiness, we employed multiple strategies aligned with established qualitative research quality standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation across data sources—interviews, documents, and observations—reduced single-source biases and validated conclusions across evidence types. Member checking involved sharing analytical summaries with 8 key research participants for feedback regarding analytical

accuracy and interpretation appropriateness; participant feedback generally confirmed analytical interpretations while offering minor refinements. Prolonged engagement spanning six-month data collection period permitted progressive deepening of contextual understanding. Detailed audit trails documenting analytical decisions, coding logic, and interpretive rationales provided transparency regarding analytical procedures and supported conclusion credibility assessment.

### ***3.5 Research Ethics and Institutional Approval***

This research obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the State Islamic University of Mataram's Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection commencement. Research protocols adhered to ethical principles including informed consent (all participants received comprehensive explanations of research objectives, procedures, and potential uses; written consent was obtained), confidentiality protections (all transcripts and data records were identified by numerical codes rather than participant names; identifying information was systematically removed from quotations and analytical documentation), voluntary participation rights (participants were explicitly informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw at any point), and avoidance of harm (interview protocols carefully avoided sensitive topics and procedures were designed to minimize burden on participating institutions). Institutional affiliation and research status were disclosed transparently to all participants and institutional leaders.

## **4. Result and Discussion**

### ***4.1 Institutional Profile and Context***

Ma'had Uthman bin Affan was established in 2017 within the Al-Khairat Islamic Education Foundation structure. The institution operates as an integrated Islamic boarding school combining traditional Islamic boarding school pedagogy with contemporary academic curricula addressing Indonesian national standards. The institution's pedagogical mission emphasizes the integration of three dimensions: Islamic spiritual development through structured Islamic studies and prayer practices; character development through Islamic ethical principles and Islamic mentorship; and academic excellence through rigorous curriculum implementation and educational quality assurance. The institution currently enrolls 312 students across three academic grade levels, with facility capacity for approximately 350 students. The institution employs 32 permanent instructional and administrative staff complemented by rotating visiting Islamic scholars and guest lecturers.

Institutional governance operates through a hierarchical administrative structure with the rector at apex, supported by vice-rectors managing academic affairs, student affairs, and public relations/marketing functions respectively. The institution functions within the broader West Nusa Tenggara provincial context, characterized by a mixed urban-rural geography, limited regional higher education competition, and significant parental demand for Islamic educational institutions combining traditional Islamic values with contemporary academic preparation. This regional context creates specific market conditions and competitive dynamics distinct from densely-populated Java-centered educational markets.

### ***4.2 Applicant Growth and Institutional Performance Data***

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Total Applicants</b>	<b>Applicants Accepted</b>	<b>Selection Ratio</b>	<b>Year-over-Year Growth</b>
<b>2021/2022</b>	187	120	1:1.6	Baseline
<b>2022/2023</b>	213	140	1:1.5	+13.9%
<b>2023/2024</b>	252	160	1:1.6	+18.3%
<b>2024/2025</b>	315	180	1:1.75	+25.0%

--	--	--	--	--

*Table 1: Applicant Growth Trajectory at Ma'had Uthman bin Affan (2021–2025)*

Table 1 presents institutional applicant data spanning the 2021–2025 period, demonstrating consistent year-over-year growth with accelerating trajectories in recent academic years. The cumulative 68.4% growth over the four-year period represents substantial institutional expansion during a period of market saturation and increased competitive intensity in regional educational markets. Notably, growth acceleration in 2024/2025 (25.0% year-over-year growth) exceeds preceding year growth rates, suggesting increasingly potent strategic positioning and market awareness. The consistency of selection ratios across years (ranging from 1:1.5 to 1:1.75) indicates that applicant growth reflects genuine institutional demand expansion rather than recruiting standard reduction or quality compromise. Growth in accepted applicant numbers (from 120 to 180, a 50% increase) combined with growing selection ratios suggests the institution simultaneously attracted increased applicant quantity and maintained or improved applicant quality—an achievement indicating successful institutional positioning and market differentiation.

### **4.3 Primary Branding Strategies Implementation**

Systematic analysis of interview data, documentary records, and observational evidence identified four interconnected primary branding strategies through which Ma'had Uthman bin Affan constructs and sustains institutional brand positioning. These strategies, while analytically distinct, operate synergistically within integrated institutional brand management systems. The following sections detail each strategy, explaining implementation mechanisms, stakeholder perspectives regarding strategic rationales and effectiveness, and observable outcomes.

#### **4.3.1 Islamic Value-Centered Brand Identity Construction**

The foundational institutional branding strategy involves constructing institutional brand identity firmly anchored in Islamic values, principles, and spiritual mission. Rather than treating Islamic religious content as supplementary institutional feature, institutional leadership positions Islamic values as central institutional identity dimension distinguishing Ma'had Uthman bin Affan from secular competitors and lower-cost institutional alternatives. One senior administrator explained: "Our brand identity fundamentally centers on Islamic values. Everything—our curriculum design, campus environment, staff recruitment, institutional communications—flows from Islamic principles. This is not marketing strategy added to education; this IS our core institutional reality."

This value-centered identity positioning manifests through multiple integrated mechanisms. Visually, the institution employs distinctive Islamic iconography throughout campus environments—from geometric Islamic patterns incorporated into architectural design to uniform designs reflecting traditional Islamic aesthetic principles. Institutional logos prominently feature Arabic calligraphy and Islamic symbolic elements. Marketing materials consistently emphasize Islamic value dimensions alongside conventional academic quality claims. Curriculum design explicitly integrates Islamic perspectives across academic subjects, not confining religious content to designated Islamic studies courses. Institutional rhetoric positions Islamic spirituality and character development as core institutional outcomes alongside conventional academic achievement.

Organizational culture documentation reveals systematic efforts to embed Islamic values throughout organizational functioning. Staff recruitment criteria emphasize Islamic knowledge and character alignment alongside academic qualifications. Student admission processes include assessments of family Islamic commitment and values compatibility alongside conventional

academic preparation. Daily institutional schedules structure time around Islamic prayer obligations, reflecting institutional commitment to faith practice integration. These operational practices translate value-centered rhetoric into observable institutional reality, creating authenticity critically important for sustainable brand positioning in value-centered markets.

Interview participants consistently emphasized that this value-centered positioning directly responds to distinctive parental demand characteristics in Islamic educational markets. Parents selecting Islamic educational institutions typically prioritize Islamic character development as primary educational outcome, often viewing academic achievement as secondary to spiritual formation. One parent interview excerpt captures this priority structure: "I choose Ma'had because they take Islam seriously. The academics are good, yes, but more importantly my child will develop Islamic character and knowledge that will guide his whole life." This demand characteristic—religious value priority over pure academic rankings—creates market opportunity for institutions positioning Islamic values centrally, a positioning unavailable to secular competitors.

#### ***4.3.2 Strategic Digital Marketing and Social Media Engagement***

The second primary branding strategy involves deliberate, systematic deployment of social media platforms as institutional brand communication vehicles. Institutional leaders explicitly recognize social media as essential marketing channels for reaching digitally-native prospective student populations. The institution maintains active official accounts across Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, with coordinated content strategies aligned with institutional brand positioning.

Institutional social media analytics document substantial platform engagement metrics. The official Instagram account commands 47,300 followers (as of June 2024) with average post engagement rates of 6.8%, substantially exceeding engagement benchmarks for educational institution Instagram accounts (typical engagement rates of 1–3%). Individual posts featuring student achievement narratives, campus activities, or Islamic inspirational content frequently generate 500–1200 engagement interactions (combined likes, comments, shares) with follower comments frequently expressing admiration for institutional mission and values demonstration. The TikTok channel, recently established (March 2024), has achieved 23,400 followers within three months, with video content emphasizing student testimonials, daily institutional routines, and Islamic educational content gaining particular traction among younger demographic segments.

Content strategy emphasizes visual storytelling showcasing institutional culture, student experiences, and value demonstration through photographs and videography rather than text-heavy information transmission. Instagram content emphasizes aesthetic, curated photography presenting institutional environments, student activities, and campus beauty. Captions accompanying visual content employ narrative framing connecting images to institutional values and missions. One particularly successful post series documents daily student experiences across academic subjects, extracurricular activities, and spiritual practices, generating consistent high engagement and positive follower commentary. Interview data reveals that social media content creation operates under deliberate strategic guidance: "We carefully plan our social media content to show the real student experience. When someone sees our posts, they should feel what it's like to be part of this community—not just academically, but spiritually and socially."

Critical analysis of social media strategy reveals its particular effectiveness in reaching younger demographic decision-makers. Prospective students now gather institutional information from social media sources prior to formal contact with institutional representatives. Parents

similarly employ social media to access peer-generated institutional information and authentic student testimonials. The institution's strategic social media presence thus serves dual functions: building brand awareness through algorithmic content distribution and generating authentic social proof through peer-to-peer communication regarding institutional quality and cultural fit.

#### ***4.3.3 Alumni Network Development as Brand Ambassador System***

The third primary branding strategy involves systematic development and activation of alumni networks functioning as institutional brand ambassadors. Institutional leadership recognizes that authentic peer recommendations from satisfied alumni constitute credible brand endorsements that institutional-generated marketing cannot replicate. The institution established the Alumni Association of Ma'had Uthman bin Affan (IAUMBA) in 2021 with explicit mandates including: (1) maintaining alumni engagement and community building; (2) facilitating alumni contribution to institutional development; and (3) promoting institutional reputation among prospective families through alumni networks.

The alumni ambassador strategy operates through multiple integrated mechanisms. IAUMBA organizes periodic alumni reunion events gathering graduates, current students, and prospective families in social settings enabling informal relationship development. Alumni participate in institutional open houses and promotional events, providing authentic testimonials regarding institutional experience and graduate outcomes. The institution systematically cultivates select alumni as primary ambassadors—individuals with strong family networks, professional status, or institutional leadership positions who are recruited to maintain active promotion of institutional reputation within their social circles. Interview data from public relations leadership provided quantitative insight into alumni referral impact: "Based on our applicant surveys, 60% of new applicants reported that alumni or current student recommendations constituted their primary information source regarding Ma'had. This demonstrates the extraordinary power of peer recommendation in our market."

This finding aligns with social science research demonstrating that in educational decision-making contexts, peer recommendations often exercise greater influence than institutional marketing communications (Word-of-mouth marketing frequently proves more effective than paid advertising). Alumni-generated endorsements carry credibility premium derived from perceived independence—alumni speak from personal experience rather than financial institutional interest. Alumni serving as brand ambassadors effectively extend institutional marketing reach into social networks institutional marketing cannot directly access. One alumnus interviewed explained his ambassador role: "When people ask me about my boarding school experience, I naturally recommend Ma'had because I had a genuinely positive experience. My younger cousins attended because of my recommendations, and now my own children are enrolled. That's what natural brand advocacy looks like."

Institutional investment in alumni network development demonstrates sophisticated understanding of branding dynamics in educational markets where authentic peer credibility substantially outweighs institutional promotional messaging.

#### ***4.3.4 Continuous Educational Quality Improvement as Tangible Brand Proof***

The fourth primary branding strategy emphasizes that institutional brand strength derives fundamentally from authentic educational quality rather than marketing communication excellence. Institutional leadership recognizes what Keller (2013) articulates—that strong brands ultimately depend on customers' actual consumption experiences rather than communication promises. The institution prioritizes sustained investment in educational quality dimensions directly contributing to student learning outcomes and satisfaction experiences.

Quality improvement mechanisms include: (1) teacher professional development programs ensuring pedagogical currency and skill maintenance; (2) curriculum innovation incorporating contemporary educational research and Islamic perspectives; (3) student support services addressing academic and personal student needs; (4) facilities improvement maintaining campus infrastructure quality and learning environment comfort; (5) Islamic education enrichment through visiting scholar programs and Islamic knowledge deepening initiatives. Institutional budget allocations reflect quality investment prioritization—approximately 62% of operational budget is allocated to teacher compensation and professional development, substantially exceeding industry averages (45–50%).

Interview data from student affairs personnel articulated this quality-centric branding philosophy: "Our marketing is honest because it reflects genuine educational reality. When we promise excellent Islamic education combined with rigorous academics, students experience exactly that. That authenticity is why word-of-mouth reputation is so strong. Real student experience creates real brand reputation." This perspective reflects what might be termed "experiential authenticity"—institutional commitment to ensuring that actual student experiences genuinely match institutional brand promises, creating credibility and sustainable reputation advantage.

Observable outcomes of quality-focused branding include high student satisfaction (survey data indicates 92% student satisfaction with overall educational experience), strong alumni retention of positive institutional associations, and robust student engagement in institutional life (participation rates in clubs, competitions, community service activities exceed 85% of student population). These experiential outcomes generate authentic positive word-of-mouth communication exceeding institutional marketing in persuasive power.

## **5. Discussion**

The identified four branding strategies collectively operationalize Aaker's (1996) brand equity dimensions within Islamic educational institution contexts. The Islamic value-centered identity positioning directly addresses brand associations—the constellation of positive attributes and values stakeholders connect to institutional brands. By consistently emphasizing and demonstrating Islamic values through curricular, operational, and communicational dimensions, the institution creates strong associational connections linking Ma'had Uthman bin Affan to Islamic authenticity, spiritual development, and values-aligned education. These associations constitute particular competitive advantages in Islamic educational markets where parental decision-making substantially weighs value compatibility.

The digital marketing and social media strategy addresses brand awareness—the extent to which prospective students and parents recognize and recall institutional brands. Strategic social media presence constructs widespread awareness among digitally-native demographic cohorts who gather educational information primarily through digital channels. The institution's substantial Instagram following (47,300) and growing TikTok presence (23,400 followers in three months) demonstrate effective awareness-building among younger decision-maker populations. Social media content's visual aesthetic appeal and authentic narrative framing enhance recall memorability compared to text-based institutional communications.

The alumni ambassador network strategy addresses brand loyalty—the propensity of customers to maintain brand selection despite competitive alternatives. Alumni-generated recommendations and continued institutional engagement create emotional bonds between alumni and institution extending beyond educational transaction completion. Alumni functioning as brand ambassadors effectively communicate that institutional experiences and relationships

persist beyond graduation, suggesting institutional impact transcending transactional educational delivery. This loyalty cultivation proves particularly important in educational markets where reputational persistence depends on sustained positive graduate associations.

The quality improvement strategy undergirds perceived quality—stakeholder assessments of overall institutional excellence relative to competitors. By aligning institutional communication with genuine educational quality delivery, the institution creates authentic quality perceptions grounded in student experience rather than marketing exaggeration. This experiential grounding proves particularly crucial in educational markets where quality claims face skepticism absent alignment with observable institutional reality.

Collectively, these four strategies address all four dimensions of Aaker's brand equity framework, suggesting comprehensive institutional understanding of brand management requirements extending beyond marketing communication to encompass organizational culture, service delivery, and stakeholder relationship development.

### ***5.2 Strategic Integration and Synergistic Effects***

Critical analysis reveals that the four identified strategies do not function as independent initiatives but rather operate synergistically within integrated institutional brand management systems. This integration appears fundamental to the institution's competitive success. Islamic value positioning establishes core institutional identity that subsequently frames all other strategic initiatives—digital marketing content emphasizes values demonstration, alumni ambassadors highlight values-aligned institutional experiences, and quality initiatives prioritize values integration throughout educational practice. This strategic coherence ensures consistent institutional messaging across diverse communication channels and stakeholder touchpoints, reducing confusion and enhancing brand clarity—critical requirements for effective brand positioning.

Synergistic integration effects amplify individual strategy impacts. Social media content showcasing authentic student experiences learning from visiting Islamic scholars (quality initiative) simultaneously demonstrates Islamic values centrality (identity strategy) and provides content alumni can reference when recommending institution (ambassador strategy). Alumni testimonials on social media platforms combine ambassador strategy with digital presence amplification, extending social media reach beyond institutional followers to alumni networks. This strategic integration reflects what Chapleo (2015) identifies as characteristics of effective institutional branding—internal organizational alignment around coherent brand positions enabling consistent external communication.

The integration appears particularly sophisticated in ensuring alignment between internally-experienced institutional reality and externally-communicated brand positioning. This authenticity—correspondence between institutional reality and brand representation—proves critical for sustainable brand positioning in value-centered markets where stakeholders possess extended institutional contact enabling perception verification. Misalignment between promised values and demonstrated practice rapidly undermines institutional credibility and reputation. The apparent institutional commitment to experiential authenticity—ensuring that actual institutional experiences match brand promises—may represent Ma'had's most strategically important branding practice, though perhaps least visible in formal branding documentation.

### ***5.3 Practical Implications for Educational Institutional Leadership***

Findings generate several important practical implications for educational institutional leaders, particularly those leading value-centered institutions. First, institutional competitive positioning increasingly depends on authentic value differentiation rather than generic quality

claims increasingly commodified across institutional sector. Islamic educational institutions particularly benefit from positioning Islamic values centrally in institutional brand strategies, responding to distinctive parental demand characteristics in Islamic educational markets. Leaders should recognize that value-centered positioning does not require compromising educational quality—indeed, the research suggests that integrated approaches combining values emphasis with quality commitment prove most effective.

Second, digital marketing and social media strategies warrant elevated institutional priority and resource investment. Prospective student and parent decision-making has fundamentally shifted toward digital information gathering, particularly among younger demographic cohorts. Institutions neglecting or minimizing social media presence effectively cede significant institutional visibility to competitors. However, effective social media strategies require more than channel access—they require authentic content generation, consistent engagement, and narrative framing connecting institutional activities to core institutional missions and values. Social media functions most effectively as platforms for demonstrating institutional authenticity rather than broadcasting marketing messages.

Third, alumni engagement should be reconceptualized from traditional "fundraising relationship" frameworks toward "brand advocacy network" perspectives. Alumni represent institutions' most credible brand ambassadors, conveying authentic institutional quality perceptions grounded in direct experience. Institutional investment in alumni relationship cultivation generates returns extending far beyond traditional development considerations. Leaders should systematically cultivate alumni engagement, particularly among alumni with influential social networks and professional status.

Fourth, institutional branding cannot succeed through marketing communication excellence divorced from operational reality. Institutions must ensure that marketed brand positions correspond with authentic institutional practice and student experiences. This requirement demands alignment across curricular design, staff recruitment and development, facilities and environment design, student support services, and institutional culture—comprehensive alignment extending beyond marketing departments' typical scope. Effective branding requires institutional-wide commitment and coordination.

## **6. Research Limitations and Future Research Directions**

### ***6.1 Methodological Limitations***

This research operates within several important methodological limitations deserving explicit acknowledgment. First, the case study design—while permitting deep contextual understanding—examines a single institution, precluding broad generalization to Islamic educational institutions across diverse geographic regions, institutional types, and market conditions. Ma'had Uthman bin Affan operates within specific contextual conditions (regional location in West Nusa Tenggara, institutional boarding school model, particular institutional history and leadership) that may not characterize other Islamic educational institutions. Findings should not be interpreted as universally applicable across Islamic educational institution populations without contextual qualification. Second, the temporal scope (2021–2025) captures a particular historical moment during post-pandemic educational market recovery and digital platform expansion. Digital marketing's dramatic effectiveness in this period may not persist uniformly if social media platform dynamics substantially shift or if prospective student demographic preferences regarding information sources diverge from current patterns. Similarly, parental demand prioritization

regarding Islamic values may fluctuate with broader sociocultural shifts affecting religious commitment and value priorities in Indonesian society.

Third, interview-based data collection methodology involves inherent researcher subjectivity and participant response bias. Interview participants may have presented institutional activities in particularly favorable lights or emphasized activities producing desired impression effects. Documentary analysis similarly reflects institutional self-presentation through official records rather than objective institutional reality. Observational data, while providing independent perspective, remained limited to five institutional visits totaling 40 hours—insufficient duration for comprehensive organizational culture observation across diverse institutional contexts.

Fourth, the research examined branding strategy effectiveness through qualitative indicators (participant perspectives, applicant growth metrics, social media engagement) rather than sophisticated quantitative brand measurement instruments (brand awareness surveys, brand preference studies, brand equity measurement scales). While qualitative indicators provide valuable insights, more precise quantitative brand measurement might reveal additional strategic nuances and effectiveness dimensions.

## ***6.2 Recommended Future Research Directions***

Future research should address identified limitations through multiple investigative approaches. Comparative case study research examining branding strategies across diverse Islamic educational institutions—varying in geographic location, institutional type (boarding schools, day schools, universities), and institutional age—would permit examination of contextual factors affecting branding strategy appropriateness and effectiveness. Such comparative research would illuminate which identified strategies generalize across Islamic educational institutions and which prove context-specific

Quantitative brand equity measurement research employing validated survey instruments would complement qualitative findings by quantitatively measuring brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty among prospective student and parent populations. Such research would permit comparative brand equity assessment across institutions and statistical analysis of relationships between specific branding strategies and brand equity dimensions. Longitudinal quantitative research would document how brand equity dimensions evolve in response to sustained strategic implementation.

Experimental research examining the relative effectiveness of specific messaging strategies and content approaches within digital marketing contexts could provide nuanced guidance regarding optimal digital communication. For instance, experiments comparing engagement rates for different social media content types (testimonial narratives versus institutional activity documentation versus inspirational religious content) would inform content strategy optimization.

Research specifically examining value-based differentiation mechanisms in Islamic educational institution contexts would advance theoretical understanding of how religious and spiritual values operate in educational market positioning. Such research might examine whether value-based positioning operates similarly across institutions with different theological orientations (traditional versus modernist Islamic educational frameworks), geographic regions with different Islamic practice prevalence, and socioeconomic student populations with different value commitment intensities.

Finally, longitudinal research following institutional brand equity trajectories post-implementation would document how branding strategy effects sustain, diminish, or evolve over

extended periods. Five to ten year follow-up research would illuminate whether growth trajectories observed in this study persist, stabilize, or revert, providing temporal perspective currently unavailable.

## **7. Strategic Recommendations for Educational Institution Leaders**

Based on research findings, we offer four specific strategic recommendations for Islamic educational institutional leaders seeking to strengthen institutional brand positioning and market competitiveness:

### ***Recommendation 1: Integrate Value-Centered Institutional Branding Throughout Organizational Operations***

Rather than treating institutional branding as marketing department responsibility, institution leaders should position branding as strategic institutional management function coordinating across curricular design, staff recruitment and development, facilities and environment planning, student services design, and institutional culture development. Establish formal branding governance structures (branding committees or task forces) with representation across institutional departments ensuring organizational-wide brand alignment. Develop explicit institutional brand positioning statements articulating core institutional values, distinctive institutional characteristics, target stakeholder segments, and institutional value propositions. Translate brand positioning statements into specific operational requirements: curriculum design standards reflecting institutional values, staff competency expectations emphasizing values alignment, facilities and environment design guidelines expressing brand identity visually, and student experience design principles ensuring stakeholder touchpoint consistency. Regular institutional audits should assess organizational practice alignment with stated brand positions, identifying gaps requiring operational adjustment.

### ***Recommendation 2: Develop Sophisticated Digital Marketing and Social Media Strategies as Core Marketing Functions***

Institutional leaders should recognize social media and digital marketing as essential contemporary channels for educational institution brand communication. Institutions should invest in dedicated personnel with social media expertise or retain external digital marketing specialists with educational sector experience. Develop coordinated social media strategies spanning multiple platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube) with platform-specific content adapted to platform characteristics and audience demographics. Prioritize authentic visual storytelling over text-heavy informational transmission—use high-quality photography and videography documenting genuine institutional activities, student experiences, and campus environments. Establish content calendars coordinating social media posts across multiple platforms with consistent messaging while varying content formats. Implement social media analytics tracking engagement metrics, follower growth, and reach patterns, using analytics insights to continuously optimize content strategy. Encourage student and alumni social media engagement through account tagging, testimonial features, and community interaction initiatives. Monitor social media platforms for stakeholder inquiry, responding promptly to demonstrate institutional accessibility and engagement commitment.

### ***Recommendation 3: Systematically Cultivate Alumni Networks Functioning as Brand Ambassador Communities***

Institutional leaders should reconceptualize alumni relationships from traditional donor-focused frameworks toward brand advocacy community perspectives. Establish formal alumni association structures with explicit brand promotion mandates alongside traditional alumni engagement functions. Organize periodic alumni events (reunions, professional development

workshops, mentorship programs) strengthening alumni-institution bonds and creating networking opportunities enabling alumni to maintain institutional connection and community identification. Create pathways for alumni to participate in institutional governance and decision-making, particularly regarding student recruitment and institutional mission clarity. Develop alumni ambassador recruitment strategies identifying alumni with influential social networks, professional status, or institutional leadership history, cultivating their active institutional promotion. Recognize alumni contributions to institutional reputation through formal recognition programs and appreciation communications. Facilitate alumni testimonial documentation and social media sharing, amplifying authentic alumni voices regarding institutional impacts. Consider establishing alumni mentor-mentee programs connecting current students with alumni mentors, simultaneously enriching student experience and deepening alumni commitment.

***Recommendation 4: Prioritize Educational Quality Improvement as Foundational Branding Practice***

Institutional leaders should recognize that branding effectiveness ultimately depends upon authentic educational quality and student satisfaction. Establish regular quality assurance processes systematically evaluating educational outcomes, student satisfaction, curriculum effectiveness, and student support service quality. Allocate institutional budgets prioritizing teacher professional development, curricular improvement, student support services, and facilities maintenance—resource investments directly affecting student experiences and satisfaction. Implement student feedback mechanisms (surveys, focus groups, suggestion systems) capturing student experience perspectives and identifying areas requiring improvement focus. Establish explicit learning outcome assessment programs documenting student achievement across academic and developmental dimensions. Communicate quality improvement efforts transparently through institutional channels, demonstrating institutional commitment to continuous excellence. Recognize that authentic quality—resulting in genuine student and alumni satisfaction—generates positive word-of-mouth communication exceeding institutional marketing in persuasiveness and credibility.

## **8. Conclusion**

This research examined the integrated branding strategies employed by Ma'had Uthman bin Affan, an Islamic educational institution in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, to understand mechanisms through which institutions construct competitive market positions while maintaining value-centered organizational missions. Through comprehensive qualitative case study analysis integrating interview data from 15 key informants, documentary analysis spanning 23 institutional documents, and direct observational data collected across five campus visits, we identified four interconnected primary branding strategies: (1) Islamic value-centered brand identity construction, (2) strategic digital marketing and social media engagement, (3) alumni network development functioning as brand ambassador systems, and (4) continuous educational quality improvement as tangible brand proof.

Findings reveal that these four strategies operate synergistically within integrated institutional brand management systems ensuring consistency across institutional communications and operations. Rather than existing as independent marketing initiatives, the strategies collectively address Aaker's brand equity framework dimensions—brand associations (through value positioning), brand awareness (through digital marketing), brand loyalty (through alumni engagement), and perceived quality (through quality improvement). The institution's

68.4% applicant growth over the 2021–2025 period demonstrates substantial measurable outcomes from sustained strategic implementation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to educational management literature by demonstrating how brand equity frameworks developed primarily in Western commercial contexts apply to Islamic educational institutions in non-Western settings. The research establishes that value-based institutional differentiation combined with authentic service quality creates sustainable competitive advantage in Islamic educational markets. The findings suggest that religious and spiritual values can function as powerful institutional differentiators when authentic organizational practices support value-centered positioning. The research also contributes to understanding digital marketing's transformative effects on educational institution communication, particularly regarding younger demographic cohort engagement.

Practically, findings offer institutional leaders contextualized guidance regarding effective branding strategy implementation in value-centered educational contexts. The research demonstrates that institutional competitive positioning increasingly depends on authentic value differentiation and experiential quality rather than marketing communication excellence divorced from organizational reality. Leaders of faith-based and value-centered educational institutions can draw upon these findings to construct institutional strategies balancing market competitiveness with spiritual and values-centered mission fulfillment.

The research also points toward important future research directions: comparative case study research examining branding strategies across diverse Islamic institutions, quantitative brand equity measurement research, experimental research examining digital marketing content effectiveness, and longitudinal research documenting brand equity trajectories over extended periods. Such future research would deepen understanding of branding mechanisms in Islamic educational institution contexts while addressing methodological limitations inherent in single-case qualitative research.

Ultimately, this research suggests that educational institutional success in contemporary competitive markets requires sophisticated integration of values-centered institutional positioning, modern digital marketing capabilities, community relationship cultivation, and unwavering commitment to educational quality. Institutions achieving this integration—ensuring that external brand communication aligns with authentic organizational practice and stakeholder experiences—position themselves for sustained competitive advantage and market success. For Islamic educational institutions specifically, the research suggests that explicit value-centered positioning responding to distinctive parental demand characteristics in Islamic educational markets, rather than generic quality positioning mimicking secular institutions, creates meaningful market differentiation and competitive sustainability.

## References

- Aaker, D. A. (1996). *Building Strong Brands*. New York: The Free Press.
- Alves, H., & Raposo, M. (2010). The influence of university image on student behaviour. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 24(1), 73–89.
- Bauer, J. C., Jugert, P., & Krampen, G. (2008). The salience of religious vs. secular value scales in a multiethnic society. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 39(4), 465–483.
- Chapleo, C. (2015). Brands in higher education: Opportunities and challenges. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 25(2), 165–179.

- Constantinides, E. (2014). Foundations of social media marketing. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 148, 40–57.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Dabbagh, N., & Kitsantas, A. (2012). Institutional support for social media learning. *Internet and Higher Education*, 15(4), 226–236.
- de Chernatony, L. (2001). *From Brand Vision to Brand Evaluation: The Strategic Process of Growing and Strengthening Brands* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Hemsley-Brown, J., & Oplatka, I. (2006). Universities in a competitive global marketplace: A systematic review of the literature on higher education marketing. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 19(4), 316–338.
- Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity* (4th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media: It's important, but why? A multidisciplinary perspective on social media impacts. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251.
- Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2012). *Marketing Management* (14th ed.). New York: Pearson Education.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Machali, I., & Hidayat, A. (2016). *The Handbook of Education Management: Teori dan Praktik Pengelolaan Sekolah/Madrasah di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Kencana Prenada Media.
- Maringe, F., & Foskett, N. (2012). *Marketing Higher Education: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Ministry of Education and Culture. (2024). *Higher Education Statistical Yearbook 2024*. Jakarta: Ministry of Education and Culture, Republic of Indonesia.
- Muhaimin. (2016). *Manajemen Pendidikan: Aplikasinya dalam Penyusunan Rencana Pengembangan Sekolah/Madrasah*. Jakarta: Kencana Prenada Media.
- Mulyasa, E. (2012). *Manajemen dan Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah*. Jakarta: Bumi Aksara.
- Sargeant, A. (2005). Charitable giving: towards a model of donor behaviour. *European Journal of Marketing*, 33(1/2), 145–162.
- Sago, B. (2013). The impact of social media on college student engagement. *Journal of Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Works*, 2013. <https://opus.jsu.edu/articles/11/>
- Siti Irene Astuti, D. (2011). *Desentralisasi dan Partisipasi Masyarakat dalam Pendidikan*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.

- Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative Case Studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 443–466). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- UNESCO. (2020). *COVID-19 Impact on Education*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Williams, M. R., & Spiro, R. L. (1985). Communication style in the salesperson-customer dyad. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 22(4), 434–442.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.