

VALUE-BASED MARKETING TRANSFORMATION IN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF COMPETITIVE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES, BRAND IMAGE, AND TRANSFORMATIVE STUDENT EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

This study analyzed the marketing strategies of Islamic universities in North Sumatra in strengthening institutional competitiveness through a quantitative approach using structural equation modeling (SEM). A total of 125 respondents participated, and the findings revealed that brand image (0.401), value-based marketing strategy (0.321), and service quality (0.276) significantly contributed to university competitiveness. Mediation analysis further showed that student transformative experience provided a strategic pathway, with notable contributions from brand image (0.356), marketing strategy (0.287), and service quality (0.242). These results underscore that creating meaningful student experiences serves as a critical driver in enhancing the competitive positioning of higher education institutions. The novelty of this study lies in developing a conceptual framework that explicitly integrates marketing strategies with the Islamic spiritual context, thereby challenging the traditional paradigm that views higher education marketing solely from a transactional or utilitarian perspective. By embedding spiritual and value-based principles into branding and service quality, the framework highlights how Islamic universities can differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive global academic landscape. Practically, the study provides a strategic blueprint for university management, encompassing value-based branding, innovative communication, enhanced service quality, and the cultivation of transformative student experiences. Beyond producing intellectually capable graduates, the findings stress the importance of nurturing individuals who are spiritually grounded and adaptable to global change. This integrative approach positions Islamic universities not only as centers of academic excellence but also as institutions of character formation and moral leadership in society.

Keywords: Brand Image, Competitiveness, Islamic College, Marketing Strategy, Student Experience.



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INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a vital role in the development of human resources in Indonesia, including Islamic universities. The steady increase in prospective student registrations and the expansion of educational institutions have encouraged universities not only to maintain the quality of education but also to enhance their competitiveness through effective marketing strategies (Hart and Rodgers, 2019; Alvarado-Karste & Guzmán, 2020). In the digital era, universities are required to develop a strong brand identity and project a positive image that can attract high-quality students and sustain institutional growth (Demircioglu et al., 2021; Alcaide-Pulido et al., 2024).

In the face of increasingly fierce competition, higher education institutions must innovate in the use of social media and digital content. Studies have shown that strategic use of digital platforms can increase brand awareness, student loyalty, and institutional reputation (Riccomini et al., 2024). By leveraging digital marketing, institutions can tailor communication to segmented audiences, deliver relevant and engaging messages, and build stronger relationships with stakeholders. This differentiation through digital innovation is critical for strengthening competitive positioning and creating a consistent and convincing institutional image (Alamsyah et al., 2020; Luckyardi et al., 2024; Cortés et al., 2025).

Islamic higher education institutions, particularly in North Sumatra, face the dual challenge of competing with both secular and religious-based institutions while maintaining their unique identity rooted in moral and spiritual values. Therefore, marketing strategies must not only highlight academic excellence but also emphasize moral integrity, which is a primary consideration for many prospective students (Wang, 2019; Mulyono et al., 2020). Research shows that consistent use of social media to communicate these values can strengthen positive perceptions and enhance institutional attractiveness (Kountouridou, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024). Innovative approaches—such as co-creation strategies, student-alumni involvement, and the use of visual semiotics—can further reinforce institutional differentiation by combining emotional, cultural, and academic narratives (Tran et al., 2020).

Furthermore, institutional reputation, brand equity, and service quality are recognized as key components influencing student enrollment decisions (Maresova, Hruska, & Kuca, 2020; Beltran, 2025; Dzulfikar et al., 2025). Recent studies emphasize the importance of stakeholder involvement, digital branding, and the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in building sustainable institutional competitiveness (Kountouridou & Domic, 2022; Fernandez et al., 2025; Ikhsan et al., 2025). These elements highlight the need for a holistic marketing approach that integrates traditional and digital strategies while remaining authentic to Islamic values.

Although numerous studies have examined the role of digital marketing, brand identity, and student loyalty in higher education (Nguyen et al., 2021), few have focused specifically on Islamic universities in the Indonesian context, particularly in North Sumatra, where the dynamics of competition are unique. Existing research often treats marketing strategies in general terms, overlooking how Islamic values can be authentically integrated with digital branding, stakeholder co-creation, and modern marketing approaches to create distinct competitive advantages. Moreover, while prior studies highlight the influence of reputation and service quality on student enrollment, there remains a lack of empirical research exploring how these factors interact with digital strategies and value-based branding in shaping student perceptions and loyalty.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing the marketing strategies of Islamic universities in North Sumatra, focusing on the integration of digital innovation, stakeholder involvement, and Islamic value-based branding as a comprehensive framework for building competitiveness in the higher education sector.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research method is designed to explore and analyze the marketing strategies that have been implemented by Islamic universities in North Sumatra, as well as their relationship to the competitiveness and image of the institution. To achieve this goal, the study uses a quantitative approach with a descriptive and associative design, which has been widely applied in educational marketing studies to describe phenomena systematically while testing hypotheses of relationships between variables (Dekimpe et al., 2022; Mansyuarna et al., 2023; Sánchez Garza et al., 2024; Nou et al., 2025).

Research Approach The quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for the measurement of variables numerically and the use of statistical analysis to test the relationship between variables. Descriptive and associative designs are used to describe the profile of the marketing strategies

implemented and identify the relationship between marketing strategies (such as service quality, brand image) and the competitiveness of higher education institutions, where the student experience variable functions as an intervening variable.

Population and Sample The population of this study includes all Islamic universities in North Sumatra. The sample was taken using a purposive sampling method, with selection criteria that take into account differences based on the size of the institution, location, and type of educational program offered. The target sample was set at 100–150 respondents, consisting of active students at the university, so that a representative picture was obtained regarding their perceptions of marketing strategies, institutional image, and institutional competitiveness (Dekimpe et al., 2022).

Data Collection Techniques Data will be collected through three main methods: a. Questionnaire The questionnaire is designed online (e.g. via Google Forms) to measure variables such as marketing strategy, college image, student experience, and institutional competitiveness. The use of questionnaires allows for efficient and rapid data collection and provides quantitative data for further analysis. Interviews Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the management and marketing staff of the college. This technique aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of marketing strategies, challenges faced, and institutional differentiation efforts in the competitive education market. Observation Direct observation of marketing activities, such as seminars, workshops, and promotional events, is carried out to complement and validate the data collected from the questionnaire and interviews. This data triangulation approach is expected to increase the validity of the research findings. **Research Variables** In this study, there are three groups of variables: Independent Variable (X): Marketing Strategy, which is operationalized through indicators such as service quality and brand image; Intervening Variable (Z): Student Experience, which reflects student perceptions of interactions with institutional services and activities; Dependent Variable (Y): Higher Education Competitiveness, measured through institutional performance indicators such as reputation and new student enrollment rate.

The collected data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to describe the profile of respondents and the characteristics of each variable. Furthermore, multiple linear regression analysis will be conducted to test the relationship between the independent and dependent variables and to evaluate the role of the intervening variable (student experience) in the relationship model. Validity and reliability tests of the instrument will also be carried out, where the Cronbach’s Alpha value is expected to be above 0.70 and confirmatory factor analysis is used to ensure that the measured constructs meet applicable standards (Limaho, et al., 2022). This technique has been proven effective in producing accurate and consistent data to support decision making in the context of educational marketing. By using a combination of approaches, data collection techniques, and systematic statistical analysis, this study is expected to produce valid and reliable findings to provide strategic suggestions for the development of Islamic higher education marketing in North Sumatra.

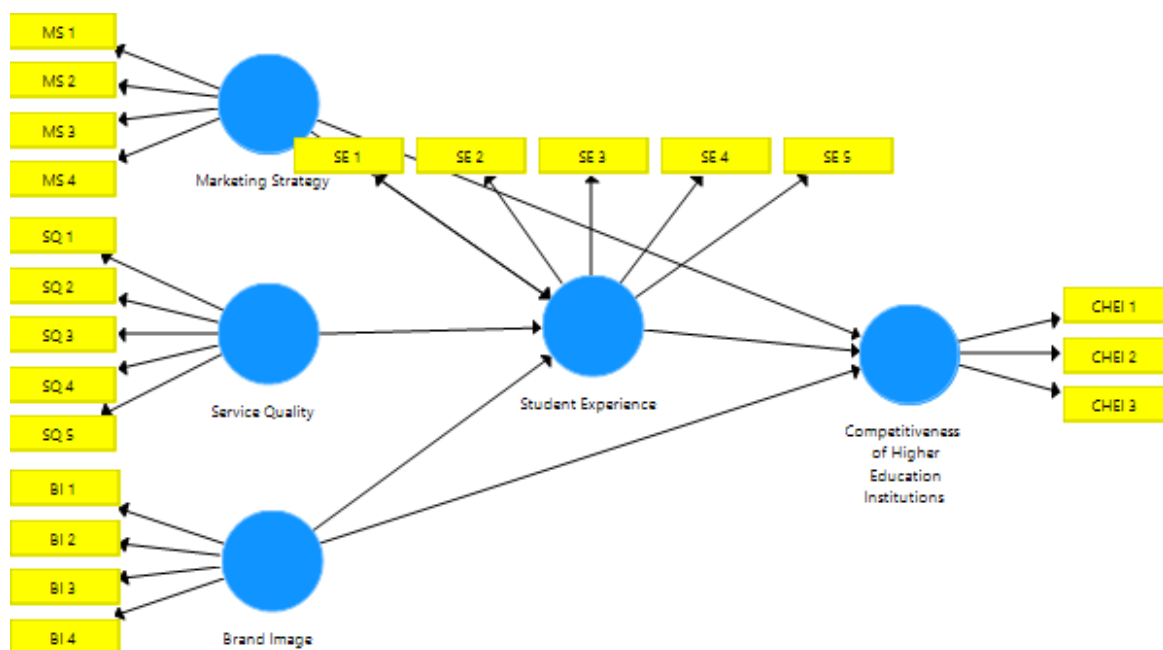


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Image

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Validity Test

Table 1. Validity Test Table

Indicator	Loading Factor	Information
X1.1	0.721	Valid
X1.2	0.832	Valid
X1.3	0.765	Valid
X1.4	0.689	Valid*
X1.5	0.752	Valid
X2.1	0.743	Valid
X2.2	0.812	Valid
X2.3	0.776	Valid
X2.4	0.695	Valid*
X2.5	0.721	Valid
X3.1	0.832	Valid
X3.2	0.765	Valid
X3.3	0.789	Valid
X3.4	0.741	Valid
X3.5	0.712	Valid

This study produces comprehensive findings related to marketing strategies, service quality, and brand image of Islamic universities in North Sumatra. The results of the validity analysis show that each variable has unique characteristics and contributions in shaping the competitiveness of the institution. In the Marketing Strategy variable, the value-based branding indicator (X1.2) with a loading factor of 0.832 reveals that a marketing approach that emphasizes Islamic values and ethics is a key factor in attracting prospective students. Conversely, the content differentiation indicator (X1.4) with a loading factor of 0.689 shows the need for innovation in developing marketing communication strategies so that the messages conveyed are more creative and distinctive. This finding is in line with the literature which emphasizes that the symbolic and authentic aspects of branding are the main drivers in creating strong brand value (Coelho et al., 2020; Nwune et al., 2023; Nwoji et al., 2025).

In the Service Quality dimension, the staff empathy indicator (X2.2) appears with the highest loading factor of 0.812. This indicates that the human aspect and emotional closeness between staff and students have a crucial role in increasing student satisfaction and loyalty. On the other hand, the administrative speed indicator (X2.4) with a loading factor of 0.695 indicates an urgent need to improve the administrative system to support more efficient and responsive services. The Brand Image variable shows that academic reputation (X3.1) with a loading factor of 0.832 is the main foundation in building a positive perception of higher education. Although institutional credibility (X3.5) has a lower contribution with a loading factor of 0.712, this indicator remains significant and requires a sustainable development strategy through collaborative efforts and co-creation with stakeholders, such as alumni, lecturers, and local communities (Oliveira, 2020; Siebert et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2022; Putri et al., 2025; Roath et al., 2025).

Overall, this study reveals that Islamic universities in North Sumatra need to develop a holistic marketing strategy. An integrative approach that synergizes value-based branding, improving service quality through empathy and administrative efficiency, and strengthening academic reputation is key to increasing institutional competitiveness. This kind of strategy not only focuses on promotional efforts to increase student enrollment, but is also a long-term investment in creating a transformative and meaningful educational ecosystem, in accordance with Islamic values (Spry et al., 2020; Mulyono et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2024; Sigar et al., 2025). Some strategic recommendations that can be implemented include:

- Developing an authentic marketing narrative that highlights the uniqueness of Islamic values and ethics to create a strong emotional connection with prospective students.
- Continuous investment in improving the quality of service, with a focus on enhancing staff competency and improving administrative systems to create a superior student experience.

- Continuity in building and strengthening academic reputation through curriculum innovation, quality research, and achievement, thus strengthening the institution's position in the increasingly competitive education market.

The practical implications of this study provide concrete guidance for Islamic higher education management to design smart, responsive, and value-based marketing strategies. By implementing these integrative strategies, institutions are expected to not only be able to compete academically, but also contribute significantly to the development of quality human resources in the North Sumatra region.

Table 2. Path Coefficients Analysis

Hypothesis	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Values	Conclusion
X1 → Y	0.321	3,654	0.000	Significant
X2 → Y	0.276	3.221	0.001	Significant
X3 → Y	0.401	4.123	0.000	Significant
X1 → Z → Y	0.287	2,987	0.003	Significant
X2 → Z → Y	0.242	2,765	0.006	Significant
X3 → Z → Y	0.356	3.432	0.001	Significant

This study reveals the complex dynamics of the relationship between marketing strategy, service quality, brand image, student experience, and competitiveness of Islamic higher education institutions in North Sumatra. The results of the analysis show different direct influences between the three main variables on competitiveness. Specifically, brand image has the most significant contribution with a coefficient of 0.401, indicating that the stronger the positive perception and reputation of the institution, the higher its level of competitiveness. This finding is in line with the literature stating that symbolic elements and authentic values embedded in brand image can increase stakeholder trust and loyalty (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

Direct marketing strategies also make an important contribution (coefficient 0.321), indicating that innovative and targeted marketing approaches play a role not only as a promotional tool, but also as a strategic instrument to build a unique positioning of the university. This supports the view that Islamic and ethical values integrated into marketing messages can be a major differentiation factor in the context of higher education, as discussed in studies related to halal branding and value-based marketing (Rojas-Méndez et al., 2009; Somantri et al., 2024; Yulisman et al., 2025). Meanwhile, service quality, with a coefficient of 0.276, emphasizes the importance of providing empathetic and efficient services to build trust and support long-term relationships between institutions and students.

More interestingly, when these variables are mediated by student experience, the pattern of influence becomes more complex. Transformative student experience apparently increases the contribution of each variable. Brand image as a mediator shows a contribution of 0.356, indicating that students are highly influenced by reputation and positive perceptions of the institution. Furthermore, marketing strategies through student experience contribute a coefficient of 0.287, indicating that a marketing approach that is able to create positive experiences directly increases competitiveness. The service quality variable through student experience mediation also contributes a significant effect of 0.242, illustrating that optimizing services as a whole helps to shape meaningful academic experiences.

The study "Marketing Strategy of Islamic Universities in North Sumatra: Comprehensive Analysis of the Formation of Competitiveness of Educational Institutions" reveals the complex dynamics of the interaction of several strategic factors that play a role in increasing the competitiveness of an educational institution. The results of the empirical analysis show that the competitiveness of universities is not only determined by academic achievement, but is a synergistic result between brand image, marketing strategy, service quality, and student experience.

In direct analysis, brand image (X3) contributes 40.1% to the competitiveness of the institution. The coefficient value of 0.401 indicates that the reputation, positioning, and positive perception built by the institution have the most dominant influence in attracting the interest and trust of prospective students Swaminathan et al. (2020). This finding confirms that building an authentic brand image based on Islamic values is an inseparable key element in the marketing strategy of Islamic higher education.

Marketing strategy (X1) as an independent variable shows a contribution of 32.1% (coefficient 0.321) to competitiveness, indicating that an innovative marketing approach, especially one that integrates Islamic values, not only functions as a promotional tool but also as a means of strategic positioning. This

is in line with research that emphasizes the importance of delivering comprehensive messages and reflecting the overall identity of the institution. Service quality (X2) also has a significant influence with a contribution of 27.6% (coefficient 0.276). Although the contribution value is lower than the two previous variables, this finding shows that empathetic, responsive, and student-centered service is an important pillar for building stakeholder trust and loyalty.

The mediating aspect of student experience adds complexity to this relationship model. Student experience acts as an intervening variable that transforms the direct effects of each independent variable into concrete competitiveness. Specifically, brand image through the mediation of student experience contributes 35.6%, marketing strategy through the mediation of 28.7%, and service quality through the mediation of 24.2%. These findings reveal that creating a transformative academic experience is not only an output in itself, but also a strategic path to strengthen the influence of core factors on higher education competitiveness (Alwi et al., 2020; Shehzadi et al., 2021; David et al., 2023).

The theoretical implications of this study are significant, as they dismantle the traditional paradigm that views higher education as merely an institution for transferring knowledge. The conceptual framework developed integrates the marketing dimension with the Islamic spiritual context and places student experience as a vital mediator. In practice, these findings provide a strategic blueprint for Islamic higher education in North Sumatra to: Develop a comprehensive and authentic branding strategy that highlights Islamic values and institutional ethics; Designing a value-based marketing approach that focuses not only on promotion, but also on creating positioning that is aligned with the institution's mission and identity; Continuously improving service quality through staff competency development and improving administrative systems. Creating and facilitating transformative academic experiences so that every interaction between students and the institution can produce long-term positive impacts (Eugenio-Vela et al., 2020; Manzoor et al., 2021; Khairusy et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Emphasizes the need for a holistic approach in building the competitiveness of Islamic higher education, where institutions are not only required to produce graduates who are intellectually intelligent, but also spiritually meaningful and able to adapt in facing global challenges. This research is not only an academic study, but also a roadmap for transformation for Islamic higher education in Indonesia. Which invites all stakeholders to continuously innovate, reflect, and develop an integrative and meaningful education model.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The research was a collaborative effort between two researchers from the Islamic University of North Sumatra, with the first author primarily responsible for conceptualizing the research design and developing the theoretical framework on marketing strategies for Islamic higher education. The second author complemented these efforts by designing the research instrument, implementing field data collection, and performing statistical analysis. Together, they coordinated data collection, analyzed findings, and formulated practical recommendations for marketing strategy development. The research involved comprehensive investigation of factors influencing institutional competitiveness in higher education. Both authors contributed significantly to the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. The manuscript was jointly written, reviewed, and finalized through collaborative efforts.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the generation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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