Higher Education Marketing: A Study of the Contribution of Marketing and Branding Strategies to Interest in Entering Islamic Higher Education

Abdul Haris Abdullah
IAIN Sultan Amai, Gorontalo, Indonesia

abdulharis120176@gmail.com

Shinta Nento
IAIN Manado, Manado, Indonesia

Shintanento17@gmail.com

Abstract

Higher Education Marketing: A Study of the Contribution of Marketing and Branding Strategies to Interest in Entering Islamic Higher Education. This study aims to determine the effect of higher education marketing and branding strategies on interest in entering Islamic universities. This research's object is students from two state Islamic universities. This study uses a quantitative approach with 124 respondents, sampling using a random sampling technique, and a questionnaire as a measuring tool. Data analysis used the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method to test the model's suitability in the study with the help of the SmartPLS version 3.2 application. The results of this study conclude that higher education marketing and branding strategies affect the interest in entering higher education.

Keywords: Marketing; Branding Strategy; Islamic Higher Education.

Introduction

Competition in higher education continues to increase, as is the case with the growing number of universities opening new study programs within their organizational units (Musselin, 2018). As expected in the competition, branding strategies are certainly required as a long-term decision of organizational performance in a sustainable manner in competition (Kuncoro, 2005). Branding strategy represents what others perceive, think, and say about products, services,

and institutions (Sigwele et al., 2018). Building a branding strategy begins with improving shared awareness to achieve organizational quality (Mundiri, 2016). Building awareness in improving organizational quality can be done in various ways, including enhancing interactions and maintaining relationships between the organization and its customers. Also, the information on the organization's products should be improved so customers can perceive them well (Martinus & Chaniago, 2017). Meeting customers' positive perceptions is an obligation that service organizations must fulfill to their customers because meeting them positively will foster trust (Tham et al., 2017).

In recent years, there have been changes in the governance of higher education systems worldwide regarding marketization policies and market mechanisms. In response to these changes, the value, effectiveness, and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts that have been effective in the business world are gradually being implemented by many universities to gain strategic advantage and brands intending to capture a larger market. (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

The strategy often carried out is promoting products effectively and advertising products using online media that can be quickly accessed and easily found by users of organizational service services. (Yasa et al., 2020). Social media services as platforms for social interaction, communication, and marketing are increasingly developing. More and more businesses in various industries have integrated or plan to integrate social media applications into their marketing programs. Institutions of higher education show an increasing interest in the potential of social media as a marketing tool to reach and attract future students. (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

Marketing and branding strategies are carried out to help high school graduates decide to continue their studies at a college that suits their potential. Because high school graduates are not accustomed to decision-making, they need clarification in choosing which college and study program to pursue. Therefore, the role of marketing and branding strategies helps explain in detail the colleges and study programs offered to them. Sometimes, the confusion of the graduates is compounded by parental demands to enroll in specific study programs, which can lead to academic problems when they start college. As a result, academic achievement, completion time, financial consequences, stress in understanding lectures, and problem-solving independence are affected, eventually resulting in low student motivation to learn. (Neroni et al., 2019).

Choosing a college and study program destination for high school graduates requires proper education by the college branding team. Providing information, explaining in detail the desired majors, describing life on campus, explaining who the educators (lecturers) are, social communities among students, costs, and demands society has on students as part of the intellectual community. The chosen study program should be explained according to their abilities and interests so that adjustment will occur quickly in living life in a college environment.

Understanding the changes in student orientation and interests towards Islamic colleges, in-depth research on marketing and branding strategies commonly perceived by students is needed. This research will specifically test the influence of marketing and branding strategies on students' interest in entering Islamic colleges. The introduction contains a background containing explicit supporting theories, problem formulation, and writing objectives written in one chapter without subtitles.

Theoretical review

Future higher education organizations must continue to invest in resources, competencies, and adequate capabilities to enhance themselves amid increasingly fierce competition in challenging socioeconomic environments, especially in attracting prospective students. (Camilleri, 2020). Although there is evidence of identification with a consumer-oriented approach in higher education marketing, more is needed to fundamentally capture their perspective and relationship with higher education. Research shows a level of variability in attitudes. It approaches consumerism in higher education and how students still view higher education in a manner different from the ideal consumer-student approach. The implications for higher education organizations include considering other variables contributing to understanding consumer orientation or clients. (Tomlinson, 2017b). According to Rutter et al., besides marketing, it is necessary to build a brand through strategies by introducing different brands to customers as adequate communication channels so that higher education consumers see distinctive differences between universities. (Rutter et al., 2017).

Marketing of higher education is perceived by prospective students considering the facilities and services offered by the target campus. (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). This is understandable because good perceptions must be followed by the facts available as promised through the marketing expansion carried out by universities.

Every university wants to be known as an industry; it needs the correct branding and public relations strategy. Especially in the ICT era, branding and communication have become more critical. (Smith, Skinner, and Read 2020). This is considered a vital issue that determines the survival of every business. According to Tien et al., a university's brand can be understood as a future orientation. The vision should demonstrate the values built and upheld and what the university can contribute to society and the nation. Meanwhile, the brand's mission helps guide proper action orientation while creating attraction for prospective students. Higher education institutions are specific areas that require brand advertising as a separate strategy. Currently, many universities have done well in promoting their brand and building their image, resulting in high annual enrollments. Universities are not worried about meeting enrollment targets or prospective students. However, many universities still need to learn how to communicate and advertise effectively. Hence, they must seek prospective students whenever entrance or graduation exams come. Competition is getting tougher in all fields, including education, demanding leaders with a strategic vision and the best brand promotion. Brands play a significant role for universities, as shown in the following ways. Firstly, university brands create attraction for students, helping universities attract enrollments. Prospective students face many options when enrolling. Therefore, universities need the right brand development strategy to create a competitive advantage over other universities. Usually, high school graduates will choose well-known universities, have a good reputation, and hold a specific position in society. (Tien et al., 2019). Some studies show that branding strategies for gaining sympathy from prospective students are an effective use of media. The media mainly used are social media applications generally aimed at potential users. The Internet and social media have changed consumer behaviors and how organizations conduct their businesses. Social and digital marketing offers significant opportunities for organizations through lower costs and better brand awareness. (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Lomer et al., 2018).

Branding strategy is one of the most comprehensive and crucial marketing areas (Cravens & Guilding, 1999). The critical point of branding is that it is impossible to have a strategy without a clear goal(Leijerholt et al., 2019). Branding can be described as a strategy that defines, builds, and manages branding (Hereźniak, 2017). Branding strategy achieves its goal when an organization can represent and support its core and distinctive competencies to deliver what customers expect. A study identified brand strategy as a moderating variable in the influence of higher

education marketing on prospective students' interest in certain universities. Their research recommends that university promotion and branding activities evaluate marketing activities considering brand elements such as design, color, and name and whether modifications are needed in the international market, given the prevalence of social media's ability to build brand awareness for current and future students (Melewar et al., 2017). A study focused on what is needed to make a strong brand. The main things to consider in creating a brand strategy are the rational and emotional aspects of a brand, emotional capital, the process of emotional brand relationships, and the importance of emotional engagement for an Islamic brand. To achieve this goal, there is a need to understand emotional strengths. Emotional associations with consumers can provide business direction. Brands should focus more on developing emotional attributes as they are essential in brand marketing. Personality characteristics that define a brand's meaning can be used to create appeal. However, brand strategy alone is not enough. It must be supported by brand management to achieve sustainable high performance (Temporal 2011).

Method

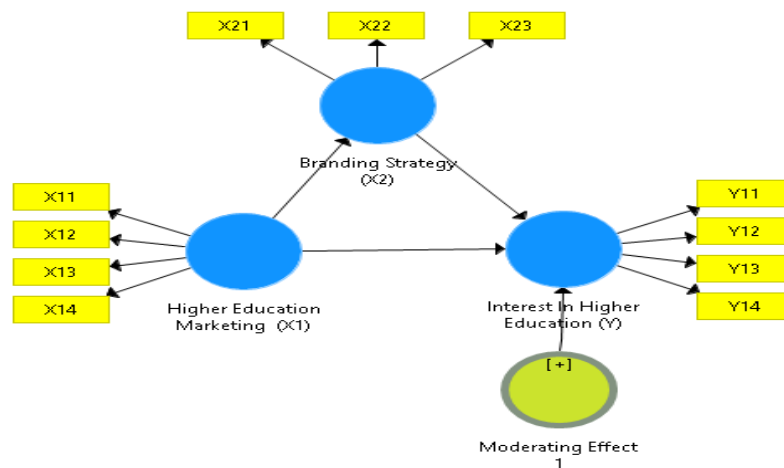Based on the literature review, the conceptual research model is as follows:

Figure 1 Hypothesis Model

The target population consists of 2 Islamic state universities, namely the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Sultan Amai Gorontalo and State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Manado. The accessible sample is composed of 124 student respondents. The sample selection technique is random sampling because the population is considered equivalent to students (Sugiyono, 2002). The selection of locations is

based on academic considerations, as both Islamic universities are changing or upgrading their status from an institute to a university. The status change requires a ratio of the number of students for the universities proposing the status change to meet the minimum required number of students. Therefore, these requirements are relevant and in line with the research theme. Data collection is done using the Google Form application.

The research variables are: 1) higher education marketing (PPT), with four dimensions derived from the research recommendations of Hammond et al., 2007 Rodic et al., 2016 Brkanlic et al., 2020, consisting of program, price, service, and excellence. (Brkanlić et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2007; Rodic-Lukic & Lukic, 2016). These four dimensions are then developed into 17 questions/statements after validation. 2) branding strategy, with three dimensions derived from the research findings of Pinar et al., 2014; and Suomi et al., 2014, comprising value, uniqueness, and novelty (Pinar et al., 2014; Suomi, These three dimensions are further developed into 22 questions/statements after validation. 3) interest in enrolling in universities (MMPT), with four dimensions derived from Halimatus's 2018 research, including motivation and hope, family, friends, and school environment (Sakdiah, 2018). These four dimensions are later developed into 25 questions/statements. The data analysis technique uses SmartPLS 3.2 software to evaluate and test the research model. The research data analysis is conducted in two parts: descriptive data analysis and analysis of measurement model results and hypothesized structural model results. (Ghozali and Latan 2015).

Results

The results are divided into three stages: The measurement model or outer model is evaluated by the convergent and discriminant validity of its indicators and composite reliability for indicator blocks. (Ghozali 2015). The second stage is the inner model, decision-making by considering the assumptions of R Square ($R2$) values and the Model Fit Summary. The third stage is the hypothesis testing results, acceptance, and rejection decisions of hypotheses based on the t-statistic value and P-Values (Sofyan Yamin & Heri Kurniawan 2011).

Outer Model Analysis Results

Outer model analysis is conducted to determine the relationship between latent variables and their manifest indicators. The first stage's results, as seen in Tables 1 and 2, are clarified in Figure 2. In Table 1, discriminant and convergent validity after

cross-loading indicate that latent constructs predict the measures in their block better than the measures of other blocks.

Table 1 Discriminant and Convergent Validity

	Interested Entry (Y)	Higher Education Marketing (X1)	Branding Strategy (X2)
X11 = Programs		0.793	
X12 = Price		0.876	
X13 = Service		0.792	
X14 = Excellence		0.745	
X21 = Value			0.866
X22 = Uniqueness			0.725
X23 = Novelty			0.907
Y11 = Motivation & Hope	0.880		
Y12 = Family	0.746		
Y13 = Friends	0.802		
Y14 = School Environment	0.774		

The subsequent measurement for composite reliability. The construct reliability results in Table 2 show that for each variable, the values of Average Variance Extracted (AVE), composite reliability, rho_A, and Cronbach's Alpha are above 0.6.

Table 2 *Construct Reliability*

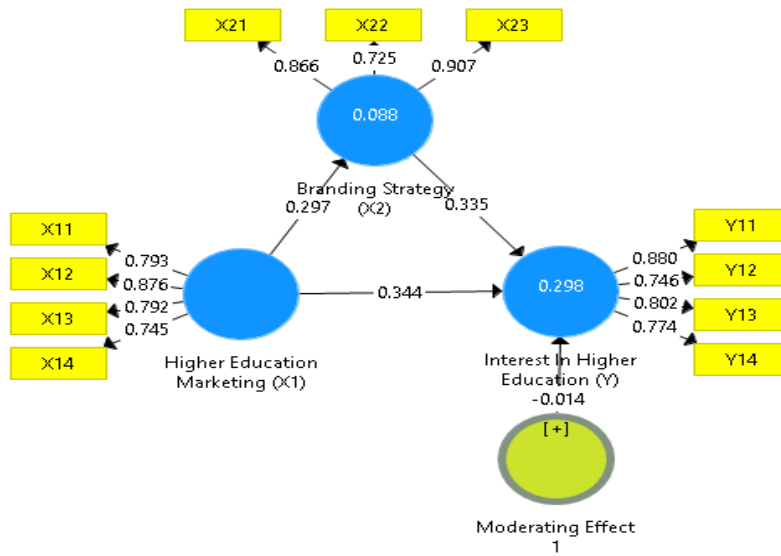|	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Interested Entry (Y)	0.819	0.878	0.643
Higher Education Marketing (X1)	0.816	0.879	0.645
Branding Strategy (X2)	0.790	0.874	0.699

Figure 2 Outer Model

Inner Model Analysis Results

This second stage is conducted to ensure that the existing structural model is accurate. This stage can be seen in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4 Nilai R Square

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Interested Entry (Y)	0.298	0.281
Branding Strategy (X2)	0.088	0.080

Based on the data processing results in Table 4, the R Square value for the college entrance interest variable is 0.298. This value explains that the percentage of college entrance interest is 29.8%. This can be interpreted as high education marketing and branding strategies have a 29.8% influence on college entrance interest, while other factors influence the remaining 70.2%. Meanwhile, the R Square value for the branding strategy variable is only 0.088. This explains that the influence of college marketing on branding strategy is only 8%. The magnitude of the influence of other factors can be identified through different research.

Table 5 Model Fit Summary

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.089	0.089
d_G	0.175	0.175
Chi-Square	130.841	130.809
NFI	0.777	0.777

Based on the processed data from SmartPLS, Table 5 shows that the overall model is considered fit. The assessment of model Goodness of Fit by looking at the value of NFI ≥ 0.777. Therefore, the testing can proceed to the third stage of hypothesis testing.

The third stage, as shown in Table 6, evaluates the relationships between latent constructs hypothesized in the study. Hypothesis testing is done by looking at the values of T-Statistics and P-Values. The hypothesis is accepted when the T-Statistics value is > 1.657 and P-Values < 0.05, and vice versa; the hypothesis is rejected when T-Statistics < 1.657 and P-Values > 0.05. Table 6 shows that overall hypotheses have positive and significant values, except for the moderation effect, which does not have a significant value; therefore, the moderation effect value should be discussed further.

Table 6 Hypothesis Test Results

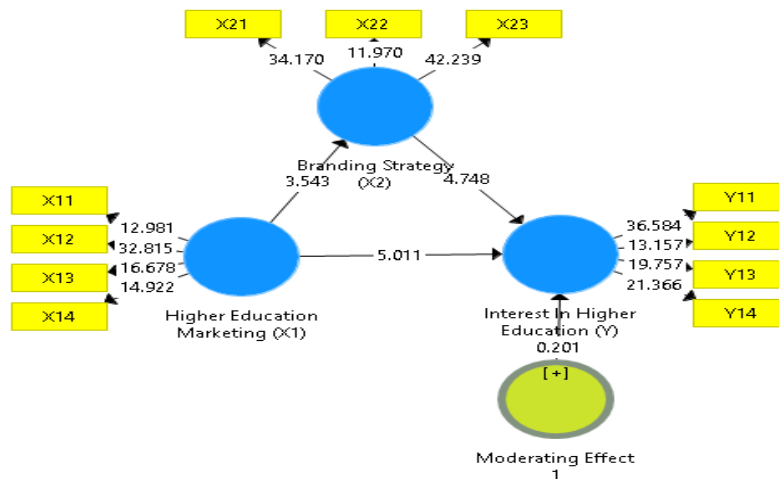|	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ($|O/STDEV|$)	P Values
Moderating Effect 1 -> Interested Entry (Y)	0.065	0.220	0.826
Higher Education Marketing (X1) -> Interested Entry (Y)	0.074	4.673	0.000
Higher Education Marketing (X1) -> Branding Strategy (X2)	0.082	3.635	0.000
Branding Strategy (X2) -> Interested Entry (Y)	0.075	4.441	0.000

Figure 3 Inner Model

Discussion

The research results indicate an influence of higher education marketing on the interest in entering higher education institutions. Higher education marketing refers to the availability of diverse educational programs, affordable tuition fees, satisfactory academic services, and excellent value in the eyes of the wider society. Meanwhile, the interest in entering higher education institutions refers to the motivation and expectations of students in their desire to continue to higher education, family encouragement, having friends with the same desire, and a conducive school environment. The findings of this research are in line with those of previous studies. For example, research conducted by Clark suggests that higher education marketers should invest resources through communication on social media to build quality relationships with their customers (Clark, Fine, and Scheuer 2017). Other studies indicate that marketing to attract students' interest in entering higher education institutions in practice uses college websites. (Zhang 2017).

The research results indicate that college marketing influences branding strategy. It can be understood that the choice of marketing style determines the branding strategy options played when introducing programs, service displays, and values that can be introduced to college customers. Several previous studies supporting these findings state that branding strategy is how organizations are personalized in the minds of consumers. Building and managing a brand, name, reputation, and identity are crucial for success. How, where, and when a college connects with its customers is determined by the brand and how much consumers associate their products or services with its brand. In today's competitive market, organizational branding becomes a significant differentiator that enters customers' minds. (Al-Zyoud, 2018).

The research findings indicate that branding strategies significantly and positively influence the interest in entering higher education institutions. Values, uniqueness, and novelty indicate branding strategies in practice. Student knowledge of the institution's profile, understanding of the institution's brand, awareness of the importance of the targeted institution's brand, knowledge of the institution's advantages, awareness of the brand image and its benefits, and consciously knowing the reasons for choosing a specific institution's brand. Prospective students' knowledge of the institution's profile includes its history, vision, mission, and advantages. Understanding the institution's brand is intended to instill in prospective students the belief that the targeted institution is the dream of many graduates to continue their studies. Meanwhile, the interest in entering

higher education institutions is indicated by feeling happy to talk about a specific institution, having an interest in the world of higher education, always paying attention to everything related to higher education, tending to seek information about specific institutions, actively searching for information about higher education, having motivation marked by school achievements to have a decent job after graduating from higher education, aiming to study at a favorite institution, parental support for pursuing higher education, family economic readiness to support educational aspirations, and a supportive school environment such as teachers, schoolmates providing enough support. A good understanding of both branding strategies and prospective students' interest in higher education institutions is essential to be taken seriously by leaders, mainly to ensure the sustainability of organizational activities in the future.

Several previous studies support the findings of this research in emphasizing the importance of branding strategies and the interest of prospective students in entering higher education institutions. Among them, research indicates that university branding is a phenomenon currently attracting university stakeholders' attention. (Chapleo, 2015; Popescu, 2012; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). The interest of prospective university students requires adequate services as users of university services. This situation is similar to the concept of marketing in approaching consumers. Consumers are ensured to obtain information that piques their interest in using services voluntarily and pleasantly. (Bowen, 2018; Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2017a).

Conclusion

Based on the research results, higher education marketing and branding strategies positively and significantly influence the interest in entering higher education institutions. Essential points that need attention from higher education institutions include opening study programs relevant to the job market, which cannot be determined unilaterally by the institutions but should involve other stakeholders, especially the users of higher education graduates. Furthermore, to attract and reach prospective students, higher education institutions are advised to package information through online media, such as the values, uniqueness, and innovation of services offered, so that the target consumers feel part of the institution.

A suggestion for researchers in the same field is to conduct a sequential study. The purpose of a sequential study is, for example, in terms of research time, to conduct a more extended study to first identify through in-depth research using

a qualitative approach to ascertain the factors that are the expectations of customers interested in continuing their studies at higher education institutions. Once the factors are identified, the researchers can then test previous theories that have been widely used. This sequential approach is expected to result in higher credibility for the variables built when constructing them in the subsequent research paradigm through quantitative methods.

The limitation of this study is in terms of the research method used. As commonly practiced, quantitative research methods only focus on revealing surface-level information. Therefore, for a more comprehensive discussion and in-depth analysis, a mixed methods approach is considered a suitable alternative to explore the theme of this research.

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