Balanced Reputation Management Strategy: A Cross-Site Case Study of Branding Image for Competitive Advantage in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to examine branding image strategies in building competitive advantage at Private Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Swasta or PTKIS) in Indonesia. The research focuses on Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong (UNZAH) and Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i (STDIIS) Jember, which adopt both local and global branding approaches. This study responds to the need for a balanced reputation management model to strengthen PTKIS's positioning amidst the dynamics of national and global higher education landscapes.

Design/methods/approach – Employing a qualitative approach with a multi-case study design and cross-site analysis, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of strategic documents. Data analysis followed the Miles & Huberman interactive model, and validation was conducted through source triangulation.

Findings – UNZAH successfully established its institutional identity through the integration of local and Islamic cultural values, leading to an increase of up to 1,000 new student enrollments per year. STDIIS developed a global branding strategy through Arabic language proficiency and a Madinah-based curriculum, attracting over 1,200 applicants. The conceptual model of Balanced Reputation Management Strategy was formulated to integrate local characteristics and global strategies within the institutional branding framework.

Research implications – This model can be implemented by PTKIS administrators as a guideline for designing long-term branding strategies grounded in Islamic values, local culture, and international competitiveness, in order to strengthen institutional image and attract prospective students.

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1. Introduction

The era of globalization and technological advancement has blurred national boundaries, including in the field of education, which serves as a fundamental pillar of a nation. Higher education institutions must respond to these changes in order to achieve competitive advantage. Every organization must possess competitive advantage to survive and grow (Porter, 1985). At the global level, competitiveness is reflected in the Institute for Management Development (IMD) World Competitiveness Yearbook 2022. Specifically, Indonesia's competitiveness ranking was 43rd in 2018, rose to 32nd in 2019, fell to 40th in 2020, improved slightly to 37th in 2021, and declined again to 44th in 2022. Furthermore, the IMD reported several challenges that the government will face in improving competitiveness, including: first, setting development strategy priorities in the post-pandemic period with appropriate financial sector oversight; second, promoting effective regulation to foster

competitiveness; and third, strengthening policies in health and education as future sources of competitive advantage (Pangastuti, 2022).

To achieve optimal results in competitiveness, the basis of competitive advantage has shifted from static efficiencies to the rate of dynamic improvement (Porter, 1994). It is not the inputs or scale the firm possesses today, but its ability to relentlessly innovate and upgrade its skill and technology (largely intangible assets) in competing." Every higher education institution must be capable of creating and sustaining its competitive advantage within its industry to survive. This concept also applies to higher education institutions, particularly Private Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Swasta or PTKIS). Based on this concept, PTKIS administrators must continually assess the competitive position of their institutions and undertake specific actions to enhance it in order to excel in the competition (Tobari, 2015). A PTKIS that is able to develop its competitive advantage will at the very least retain its student base and maintain high interest among prospective students.

Competition in the education sector has both positive and negative impacts; while it can drive quality improvements, it can also reduce student numbers to the point of threatening institutional viability. Meeting the required student body size is therefore crucial for PTKIS development and necessitates appropriate management strategies (Soegoto, 2011). Competitiveness is linked to reputation and status, and it depends on internal values that are externally assessed, such as student enrollment figures and institutional rankings (Haan & Yan, 2013; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). PTKIS face challenges in terms of innovation and managerial improvement to cope with change and remain competitive (Musfah, 2015).

To enhance competitiveness, universities must develop a brand image as a strategic response to competition and to attract prospective students. Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo has implemented the concept of "pioneer of khaira ummah" by focusing on academic and non-academic achievements at both national and international levels to build a positive image and public trust.

UNZAH has been recognized as one of the best PTKIS by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and received the 2021 ADIKTIS award for the category of international student achievements (Syahwan, 2023). Under the auspices of the Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic boarding school, UNZAH promotes the concept of "pioneer of Khairul Ummah" with a vision of nurturing intelligent students with commendable character. In 2022, UNZAH also won two awards from Kopertais Region IV for having the highest number of AMI auditors and for national and international student achievements. UNZAH's new student enrollment reached 1,000, making it one of the most in-demand PTKIS (Muzakki, 2022). UNZAH continues to improve quality through national and international accreditation, reinforcing its identity as a "khairu ummah" institution ready to compete with other universities. To meet the demands of intense competition, the university implements strategies that align with public needs for quality education.

In addition to UNZAH in Genggong Probolinggo, the Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i (STDIIS) in Jember has established a competitive edge through Arabic-based education as a tool for da'wah. STDIIS's curriculum is integrated with that of the Islamic University of Madinah and the national curriculum. The institution emphasizes the importance of Arabic proficiency for deepening Islamic knowledge, addressing the shortcomings among Indonesian ulama, and strengthening their contributions in international Islamic organizations (Widi, 2021). In 2021, STDIIS received 1,258 applications, including for its Arabic preparatory program (I'dad Lughawi), and was awarded the Kopertais Award for managing an accredited journal (Yusnizar, 2021).

UNZAH Genggong and STDIIS Jember both face intense competition from numerous PTKIS in East Java that offer a variety of programs and competitive advantages. This competition is particularly

pronounced among campuses in regions that serve as primary recruitment pools for student intake. Therefore, positioning as a leading institution in the public consciousness is crucial for distinguishing UNZAH and STDIIS from their competitors. This study focuses on branding image strategies for achieving competitive advantage, encompassing characteristics, strategies, evaluations, and implications in the context of PTKIS competition.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach, aimed at obtaining an in-depth understanding of phenomena in the field (Melong, 2001). This method was selected for three reasons: first, it facilitates the exploration of the natural relationship between researchers and informants; second, it presents a direct connection between researchers and respondents; and third, it is more sensitive to the influence and value patterns encountered (Mulyana, 2020).

The research adopts a multi-case study design, intended to comprehensively understand field phenomena or issues, including personal, social, and case development aspects (Andi Prastowo, 2011). A multi-case study involves investigation of two or more subjects or settings, which may take the form of an expanded single case study or a comparative study (Beck, 1998). The design of this multi-case study was formulated to ensure scientific accountability by establishing a logical connection between the research focus, relevant data collection, and analysis of findings—in this case, the phenomenon of branding image strategies toward competitive advantage at Private Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS), specifically Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo and Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i Jember.

2.1. Sample/Participant

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques. The participants consisted of Islamic university leaders, faculty members, and students from both institutions. This technique was chosen to ensure that the data collected were relevant to the research focus and originated from respondents with a clear understanding of branding image in relation to competitive advantage in higher education, both at UNZAH and STDIIS.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Code	Position	Description
R1	Rector/Chairman	The highest leader of the university, responsible for overall institutional management.
R2	Vice Rector	Assists the Rector in specific areas such as academics, student affairs, and finance.
R3	LP3M Head	Leads the development of learning and quality assurance at the university.
R4	Lecturer	Educator and researcher who guides students and contributes to scientific advancement.
R5	Student	Higher education learner engaged in academic activities.

2.2. Data Collection

Qualitative research focuses on understanding social phenomena from the participants' perspectives, typically using narrative data from interviews, observations, and documents (Wahidmurni, 2008). Data collection methods employed in this study included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was conducted to obtain a direct understanding of the daily activities within the higher education institutions in relation to branding image strategies for competitive advantage (Creswell, 2013).

In-depth interviews were carried out with key figures including the Rector, Vice Rector, LP3M Head, lecturers, and students to gain insights into branding image strategies. Document

analysis involved reviewing official institutional documents such as strategic plans, curriculum guidelines, teaching modules, and activity records to complement the data obtained from observations and interviews (Glenn A. Bowen, 2009).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model, which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Source triangulation was used to ensure data accuracy. In analyzing multi-case study data, the researcher conducted two stages:

a. Individual Case Analysis: Each institution—Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong and Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i Jember—was analyzed individually by interpreting verbal data to extract meaning. This process was integrated with data collection, following three flows: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1984); and

b. Cross-Case Analysis (Yin, 2012): This phase compared findings from each case through the following steps: applying an inductive approach to compare individual cases; formulating cross-case conceptual statements or propositions; evaluating the alignment of propositions with factual data; reconstructing propositions based on each case's findings; and repeating the process as needed until saturation was reached.

Finally, the researcher formulated propositions based on field data derived from preliminary findings, which were then modified through cross-case analysis. Research should not merely conclude with substantive findings but should also formulate thesis statements derived from the abstraction of these findings (Rahardjo, 2010).

2.4. Ethics

This study adhered to strict ethical standards and received authorization from the respective Islamic higher education institutions. Participants were provided with clear information, and confidentiality of their data was maintained. Data validity was ensured through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research aims to offer an in-depth understanding of branding image strategies toward competitive advantage and to contribute to the theoretical development of Islamic educational management.

3. Findings

3.1. Characteristics of Branding Image at UNZAH and STDIIS

The branding image of UNZAH Genggong Probolinggo emphasizes the integration of local cultural and religious values. Its main characteristics include: (1) Integration of Local Cultural Values: UNZAH incorporates local cultural values and pesantren teachings into its curriculum to establish a balance between academic education and Islamic values. (2) Culturally-Based Educational Methods: UNZAH employs the "Satlogi Santri" and the "Nine Noble Traits of Santri" approaches to shape student character and morality through diverse learning methods. (3) Campus Design Reflecting Local Culture: The campus is designed to reflect local values, with integrated improvements in academic quality, research, and community service. (4) Cultural Identity Representation: Cultural identity is reinforced through instruction in the Qur'an, Hadith, and Qoulul Ulama, cultivating graduates with spiritual integrity. (5) Student Involvement in Cultural Preservation: Students actively participate in preserving local culture, in alignment with UNZAH's vision as a pioneer of the "Khairu Ummah," integrating religious values into everyday life.

R1 (Rector): "UNZAH is designed to reflect and strengthen the values upheld by the Zainul Hasan Islamic Boarding School Foundation. We ensure that all policies and programs implemented at the university are aligned with the foundation's principles, so that graduates are not only academically excellent but also morally upright."

Meanwhile, the branding image of STDI Imam Syafi'i Jember is characterized by: (1) Commitment to Internationalization: Founded by a graduate of Umm al-Qura University, Madinah, in 2010, STDI focuses on Arabic language education to enhance Islamic understanding, supported by community service and language training programs. (2) Development of Global Competence: STDI enhances educational quality through feedback from alumni users and parents, guided by a vision and mission that ensure graduates possess noble character and societal relevance. (3) Use of an International Language: Arabic is prioritized in education. Lecturer and student recruitment are based on Arabic proficiency, with student selection conducted via oral examination. (4) Globally-Oriented Curriculum: The branding slogan "Studying in Indonesia as if Studying in Madinah" includes curricular adaptation from the Islamic University of Madinah and the use of Arabic in instruction, creating a high-quality educational experience.

R1 (Chairman): "We feel responsible for establishing the STDIIS campus, beginning with Arabic-based education, as it is essential for understanding Islamic sciences."

From these descriptions, it is evident that UNZAH Genggong Probolinggo integrates local cultural values into education to produce graduates who are both excellent and morally grounded. In contrast, STDI Imam Syafi'i Jember focuses on internationalization and Arabic language mastery through a curriculum adapted from the Islamic University of Madinah. Both institutions emphasize the pivotal role of education in shaping student character in accordance with religious and cultural values.

3.2. Branding Image Strategies of UNZAH and STDIIS

UNZAH Genggong focuses on image-building through the integration of local culture and Islamic values. Key strategic points include: (1) Integration of Local Culture in Vision and Mission: Combining Islamic and local cultural values within the curriculum and daily activities to shape intelligent and moral graduates. (2) Development of a Culturally-Based Curriculum: Courses such as "Genggong Pesantren Philosophy" strengthen student character through deep understanding of Islamic teachings. (3) Promotion through Extracurricular Activities: The Foreign Language Study Center (PSBA) and the Qur'anic Recitation Study Center (PSQQ) enhance students' language skills and Islamic comprehension. (4) Collaboration with Local Communities: Mosque-based community service programs empower local community assets, especially mosques, using the ABCD method. (5) Visual Branding Reinforcement: In synergy with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), UNZAH reinforces its image as a higher education institution rooted in local culture and Islamic education. These strategies solidify UNZAH's image as a distinguished university grounded in local culture.

R2 (Vice Rector): "The development of a culturally-based curriculum is one of UNZAH's strengths. Courses like 'Genggong Pesantren Philosophy' and 'Mahfudzot' provide in-depth understanding of Islamic teachings, enabling students to be not only academically capable but also morally upright."

In contrast, the branding image strategy of STDIIS Jember includes: (1) Inclusive Environment: Creating a campus that embraces diverse backgrounds, supported by faculty engagement and parental involvement in character education. (2) Core Global Messaging: Emphasizing `aqidah and noble character to build international trust. (3) Global Training: Providing training in cross-cultural communication skills, emphasizing the use of Arabic. (4) Curriculum Innovation: Integrating the Islamic University of Madinah's curriculum with national standards for comprehensive understanding. (5) Image Monitoring: Conducting student mentoring and

implementing non-physical disciplinary measures to support character education. Through these strategies, STDI Imam Syafi'i Jember is committed to inclusive and quality education.

> R2 (Vice Chairman): "Integrating the Islamic University of Madinah's curriculum with national standards enables our students to gain a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge and Islam."

From the above explanations, it can be concluded that both UNZAH Genggong and STDI Imam Syafi'i Jember focus on image-building by integrating Islamic and local cultural values. UNZAH prioritizes the development of a culturally and character-based curriculum, whereas STDI Jember emphasizes an inclusive environment and training in cross-cultural communication. Both are committed to producing graduates who are morally upright and intelligent.

3.3. Evaluation of Branding Image at UNZAH and STDIIS

The evaluation of UNZAH Genggong's branding image strategy aims to assess the effectiveness of its campus branding. The evaluations include: (1) Success in Implementation: Internal quality audits are used to assess the achievement of Vision, Mission, Goals, and Objectives (VMTS). Audit results show significant progress in academics and management, although some areas require improvement. (2) Performance Indicators: Quantitative and qualitative indicators are used to assess the quality of education, research, and community service. This evaluation ensures that UNZAH meets established standards. (3) Talent and Interest Mentoring: Mentorship programs focus on skill development and digital literacy, enabling students to excel at national and international levels. (4) Program Evaluation: Internships at PSQQ and PSBA bridge theory and practice, allowing students to make tangible contributions to society. (5) Reports and Recommendations: Quarterly meetings evaluate achievements and formulate strategic improvement plans. This evaluation strengthens UNZAH's image as an Islamic campus that positively contributes to society and continues to develop as a pioneer of the Khairu Ummah.

> R3 (Director of LP3M): "We use quantitative and qualitative indicators encompassing academic, research, and community service aspects. Evaluations are conducted regularly to ensure that all targets are achieved."

Meanwhile, the branding image evaluation at STDIIS Jember involves: (1) Satisfaction Surveys: STDIIS Jember measures stakeholder satisfaction to evaluate branding. Success indicators include increased student interest from outside Jember and graduates' contributions to society. (2) Internal Quality Audit: Internal audits ensure that university operations comply with standards. Good governance systems maintain educational quality and boost public trust. (3) Global Competency Assessment: Halaqoh sessions identifying academic issues contribute to improved teaching quality and reinforce STDIIS's image as a responsive institution. (4) Partnership Evaluation: Feedback from graduate users is used to refine the curriculum, enhancing graduate relevance in the job market. This evaluation reinforces STDIIS's branding, sustains quality, and ensures graduate competitiveness.

> R4 (Lecturer): "Problem-mapping halaqoh sessions enable us to identify academic and social issues and design prompt solutions to maintain teaching quality and strengthen communication between lecturers and students."

The branding strategy evaluations of UNZAH Genggong and STDIIS Jember emphasize the importance of quality audits, performance assessments, and satisfaction surveys in enhancing image and quality. UNZAH focuses on talent development, internship programs, and academic achievement, while STDIIS prioritizes global competence, partnerships, and graduate relevance in society. Both institutions strengthen public trust and educational quality through periodic evaluations.

Certainly. Below is the English translation of section 3.4 Implications of the Branding Image of UNZAH and STDIIS, rendered in an academic tone suitable for reputable scholarly journals, with original structure, terminology, and formatting preserved:

3.4. *Implications of the Branding Image of UNZAH and STDIIS*

The implications of the branding image strategy at Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan (UNZAH) include:

a. Enhancement of Image and Reputation. The branding strategy as a pioneer of *Khairu Ummah* enhances public trust through social engagement and the application of Islamic values, positioning UNZAH as a top choice for prospective students.

b. Attractiveness to Prospective Students. This strategy appeals to prospective students beyond the usual intake pool by emphasizing Islamic values. Student diversity enriches the learning experience and strengthens UNZAH's reputation.

c. Strengthening of Identity and Pride. Effective branding attracts students from diverse backgrounds, increases enrollment, and reinforces academic community pride in the university.

d. Reinforcement of Relations with Local Communities. Collaboration with local communities supports cultural preservation and fosters harmonious relationships. The academic community, identifying with Islamic values, demonstrates high commitment, contributing positively to institutional efficiency.

Overall, UNZAH's branding strategy strengthens institutional identity, reputation, and societal contribution.

> R4 (Lecturer): "Strong branding has increased student pride. Many prospective students now consider UNZAH a top choice due to the Islamic values we promote."

As for the implications of STDIIS Jember's branding image, these include:

a. Raising Local Educational Standards. STDIIS Jember's branding boosts interest among prospective students and necessitates infrastructure development and instructional innovation, thereby enhancing campus reputation.

b. Strengthening Identity and Local Values. The branding concept of "studying as if in Madinah" strengthens STDIIS's identity, attracts committed students and young researchers, and fosters international collaboration and recognition.

c. Improving Access and Opportunities. The branding facilitates collaboration with partner schools, enhancing educational quality and strengthening STDIIS's position in Islamic education.

d. Awareness and Appreciation of Diversity. Branding strategies that highlight Islamic values and diversity reinforce STDIIS's reputation in society, supporting both national and international recognition.

> R5 (Student): "I was drawn to study here because the campus branding resembles that of Madinah. The academic environment is highly Islamic and supports both spiritual and intellectual growth."

The implications of the branding image at UNZAH and STDIIS Jember reveal that Islamic value-based strategies enhance image, reputation, and appeal to prospective students. UNZAH reinforces its relationship with the local community, while STDIIS Jember, through its "study as if in Madinah" branding, elevates educational standards and collaboration with partner schools, producing a positive impact on education and society.

The cross-site findings on Branding Image Strategy—analyzed through the dimensions of characteristics, strategies, evaluations, and implications—demonstrate the efforts of Universitas

Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong Probolinggo and Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i Jember in achieving competitive advantage. These findings are further clarified in the table below:

Table 2. Cross-Site Comparison of UNZAH Genggong & STDIIS Jember

Branding Image Strategy	SITE 1 UNZAH Genggong	SITE 2 STDIIS Jember	Cross-Site Findings
Approach	Local Value-Based	Global Value-Based	Balance Reputation Management
Branding Image Characteristics Dimension	• Integration of Local Cultural Values into the Curriculum • Academic and Non-Academic Activities Based on Local Culture • Campus Design Reflecting Local Culture • Cultural Identity Imaging and Communication • Student Engagement in Cultural Preservation	• Commitment to Internationalization • Development of Global Competence • Use of International Languages • Globally-Oriented Curriculum • Global Collaboration and International Networking	• Continuous Innovation and Adaptation • Visionary Leadership • Social and Community Engagement • Interdisciplinary and Relevant Curriculum • Student Experience Centered on Transformation
Branding Image Strategy Dimension	• Integration of Local Culture into the University's Vision and Mission • Development of a Curriculum Based on Local Culture • Promotion of Local Culture through Extracurricular Activities and Events • Collaboration with Local Cultural Communities • Strengthening Visual Branding Reflecting Local Culture	• Creation of an Inclusive and Diverse Campus Environment • Development of a Global Core Message • Training and Development of Global Competence • Innovation in Globally-Oriented Curriculum • Monitoring and Evaluation of Global Image	• Establishment of a Transformational Vision and Mission • Analysis to Identify Strengths and Opportunities • Integration of Transformational Culture into Curriculum and Academic Activities • Utilization of Technology and Digital Media for Promotion • Monitoring and Evaluation of Branding Impact
Branding Image Evaluation Dimension	• Measuring the Success of Branding Strategy Implementation • Identifying Both Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators • Measuring the Success of Branding Strategy Implementation • Preparation of Evaluation Reports and Recommendations	• Stakeholder Satisfaction and Perception Surveys • Evaluation of the University's Internal Quality Audit • Assessment of the Impact of Global Competence Development • Evaluation of University Partnership Performance	• Determination of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) • Data Collection and Feedback • Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis • Long-Term Impact Evaluation • Reporting and Follow-Up
Branding Image Implications Dimension	• Enhancement of Institutional Image and Reputation • Greater Appeal to Prospective Students • Strengthening of Institutional Identity and Pride • Strengthened Relationships with Local Communities	• Improvement of Local Education Standards • Reinforcement of Local Identity and Values • Increased Access and Opportunities for the Community • Enhanced Awareness and Appreciation of Diversity	• Enhancement of Institutional Reputation and Image • Improvement in the Quality of Students and Staff • Strengthening of Strategic Networks and Partnerships • Increased Research Innovation and Productivity • Positive Social and Environmental Impact

The findings illustrate that, in general, the branding image strategy aimed at achieving competitive advantage—through a local value-based approach at Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong and a global value-based approach at Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i Jember—has been effectively implemented in developing their respective educational concepts. Nonetheless, both differences and similarities were identified in certain aspects of branding image strategies oriented toward competitive excellence. These aspects—characteristics, strategies, evaluations, and implications—engage all stakeholders and are managed from the outset in accordance with their institutional branding.

Accordingly, by examining the diverse branding image strategies employed by private Islamic higher education institutions in pursuing transformation-based competitive advantage, this cross-site study provides a comprehensive perspective on how transformative branding image strategies can reinforce the competitive positioning of such institutions. The elaboration of cross-site findings on transformative branding image is as follows:

a. Branding Image Characteristics for Competitive Advantage include continuous innovation and adaptation, visionary leadership, social and community engagement, an interdisciplinary and relevant curriculum, and a student experience centered on transformation.

b. Branding Image Strategies for Competitive Advantage involve establishing a transformational vision and mission, conducting analyses to identify strengths and opportunities, integrating transformational culture into curriculum and academic activities, leveraging technology and digital media for promotion, and monitoring and evaluating branding impacts.

c. Branding Strategy Evaluation for Excellence entails identifying key performance indicators, collecting data and feedback, conducting both qualitative and quantitative analyses, evaluating long-term impacts, and implementing reports and follow-up actions.

d. Implications of Branding Strategies for Competitive Advantage include improved institutional reputation and image, enhanced quality of students and staff, strengthened networks and strategic partnerships, increased research innovation and productivity, and positive social and environmental outcomes.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Characteristics of Branding Image toward Competitive Advantage*

The branding image characteristics of UNZAH Genggong and STDIIS Jember reflect differing yet complementary approaches. UNZAH Genggong focuses on local culture within its curriculum and activities, positioning itself as a center for cultural preservation. In contrast, STDIIS Jember emphasizes internationalization and global competence through international collaboration. Each institution develops its branding in line with its institutional vision: UNZAH through local cultural heritage, STDIIS through global networks.

Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia compete to market their academic offerings with a religious image, as this aligns with the cultural values of the predominantly Muslim society. Islamic branding fosters brand faith and more effectively reaches religious consumers (Agus R & Ummah, 2019). Religion as a commodity offers similar benefits—such as salvation and peace—even if presented in varied forms. The key difference between religious and non-religious brands lies in the services and symbols offered as added value (Widodo & Maryama, 2021).

Religious brands convey the highest spiritual values (Idris et al., 2020), fulfilling both the emotional and rational needs of consumers (Septiyani et al., 2023). A brand religiousity image establishes spiritual connections with customers and significantly influences purchasing behavior

in Islamic marketing (Far Shodiq & Alfiyah, 2022). The "Satlogi Santri" philosophy of Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong teaches students to master and apply knowledge in life. Its core values—*Santun* (courtesy), *Ajeg/Istiqomah* (steadfastness), *Nasehat* (advice), *Taqwa* (piety), *Ridha* (contentment), and *Ikhlas* (sincerity)—serve as the foundation of student activities and distinguish this pesantren from others (Wijayanto et al., 2022). These values are instilled to develop individuals who embody *Satlogi* principles and possess both Islamic and national consciousness. Meanwhile, STDI Imam Syafi'i Jember foregrounds a globally oriented branding approach emphasizing continuous innovation and adaptation in response to educational dynamics and stakeholder needs (Rohiem & Arifin, 2023).

Building a strong brand image is a long-term process, and its impact is not immediately visible. Therefore, the measures taken are inherently strategic and enduring. Positioning is crucial in building consumer trust and determines brand existence—this aligns with Porter's strategy theory, which places positioning at the core (Porter, 1993). Four key elements underpin effective positioning: customer motivation to purchase, reflection of competitive advantage, uniqueness, and sustainability (Blain et al., 2005). Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong and STDI Imam Syafi'i Jember adopt this positioning by highlighting brand characteristics appealing to parents seeking strong religious education for their children (Kavaratzis, 2008). Both institutions operate under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and excel in cultural and transformational aspects, offering distinctive competitiveness in Islamic higher education. Branding creates unique associations that differentiate academic offerings (Mazzarol & Soutar, 1999). Institutions can achieve excellence through signature programs and religious events, alignment of vision and mission, quality enhancement, and strengthening graduate identity rooted in Islamic values (Ulufah et al., 2024). Effective positioning, differentiation, and branding must be accompanied by quality processes, minimal errors, and excellent service delivery (Wang et al., 2011).

Both institutions pursue competitive advantage through religious values and transformational approaches. With strong positioning, they highlight deep Islamic education and program distinctiveness, using long-term branding strategies that incorporate innovation, adaptability, and quality service to maintain competitiveness in Islamic education.

4.2. Branding Image Strategies toward Competitive Advantage

UNZAH Genggong adopts a branding strategy that integrates local culture into its institutional vision and mission, making cultural heritage an integral part of the university's identity. A curriculum grounded in local culture fosters student appreciation for heritage, further reinforced by extracurricular activities that strengthen institutional identity and pride. Collaboration with local communities enhances cultural promotion and opens avenues for partnership.

Conversely, STDIIS Jember prioritizes a more global and inclusive branding approach, cultivating an open and diverse campus environment. Its emphasis on internationally benchmarked curricula and the development of global competencies equips students for global markets. Innovative approaches and continuous evaluation ensure sustained competitiveness on the international stage.

Long-term strategies are essential for aligning internal strengths and weaknesses with external opportunities and threats (Agus R & Ummah, 2019). A well-formulated strategy assists educational institutions in achieving their objectives and sustaining a competitive edge. Strong branding is vital for attracting and retaining students, while continuous improvement in educational quality is necessary to meet their evolving needs (Wijayanto et al., 2022). Educational institutions must consistently revitalize their strategies in response to environmental demands and competition to determine future directions, programs, and markets (Setiawan et al., 2022).

Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong and Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i Jember are recognized for their commitment to academic excellence and moral character development. UNZAH Genggong, under the auspices of Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong, implements an educational approach rooted in NU culture, embracing the *Satlogi Santri* philosophy and *Nine Noble Traits*. STDIIS Jember, managed by alumni of Umm al-Qura University in Madinah, prioritizes Arabic-based education and *tawhid* values, with the *I'dad Lughawi* program as a foundational component. Both institutions have successfully built strong brand images in society—UNZAH as a pioneer of *Khairu Ummah* and STDIIS Jember as an institution that offers a learning experience akin to studying in Madinah. Their focus on practical skills and moral values reinforces this image. Institutional brand image is reflected in their educational strategies and program implementation, which have gained widespread public trust (Mardius et al., 2023). Brand image is one of the most vital aspects of any educational organization as it shapes public perception and forms a pre-consumption impression of its offerings (Sahin & Singh, 2017).

To achieve competitive advantage through branding strategies, several key elements must be integrated: enriched curricula, Arabic language instruction, *Satlogi Santri*-based education, standardized human resources, community service programs, and the *I'dad Lughawi* preparatory program. This approach focuses on student-centered learning, enriching educational experiences, and enhancing linguistic and cultural competencies through Arabic. *Satlogi*-based learning fosters students' social, ethical, and spiritual skills. Human resource standardization ensures faculty quality aligned with higher education standards. Community service programs bridge theory and practice, equipping students with social and leadership skills (Hakim Muthi & Utama, 2023). The *I'dad Lughawi* program provides a solid foundation in Arabic for advanced studies.

Moreover, prioritizing student experiences, offering motivation, and supporting intellectual development among educators are crucial to creating a conducive learning environment. By targeting the right market segment, institutions can implement more effective branding strategies, producing graduates who are competitive in the global labor market (Anwar et al., 2022). For marketing effectiveness, higher education institutions must align their target student segments with institutional vision and mission. The application of Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) has proven effective in guiding resource allocation to essential service areas (Fatmawati & Murfi, 2025). A transformative approach to branding involves long-term planning with ambitious goals and strategies for deep, meaningful change. Institutional vision should reflect aspirations to lead in educational innovation and student development. By analyzing strengths and opportunities, institutions can formulate more effective strategies. The integration of transformational culture into the curriculum helps shape student character and competencies. Leveraging digital technology expands promotional reach, while impact evaluations ensure continued relevance of branding strategies.

UNZAH Genggong's branding strategy emphasizes local culture and community engagement, while STDIIS Jember focuses on diversity and globalization. These strategies help establish strong institutional identities, enhance reputation, and create meaningful educational experiences for students.

4.3. *Evaluation of Branding Image toward Competitive Advantage*

The evaluation of branding image at UNZAH Genggong centers on measuring the success of strategy implementation through both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitative data such as fluctuations in student enrollment and levels of student satisfaction, alongside qualitative data on community perceptions, are utilized to assess the extent to which branding objectives have been achieved. The results are compiled into evaluation reports and strategic recommendations,

enabling continuous reflection and realignment of strategies based on identified findings. STDIIS Jember applies satisfaction and stakeholder perception surveys, internal quality audits, as well as assessments on the impacts of globalization and institutional partnerships. These evaluations measure branding effectiveness and its influence on institutional reputation and global competence.

Routine performance evaluations through regular meetings are common practice in higher education. According to Umiarso, institutions aiming to establish a strong brand image in the public eye must have clearly defined evaluation strategies and criteria. As educational organizations consist of individuals united in the pursuit of ideal education for students, collective deliberations facilitate effective problem-solving. Regular meetings serve to monitor and evaluate institutional programs, thereby supporting brand image development (Menggo et al., 2021). Evaluation steps for branding image strategies often employ SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), comprising: (1) assessing each program associated with branding; (2) analyzing internal strengths and weaknesses; (3) identifying external opportunities and threats; and (4) formulating consensual solutions followed by collective implementation (Far Shodiq & Alfiyah, 2022).

Evaluation is defined as the process of collecting and delivering information useful for decision-makers in considering alternatives (Ponto et al., 2023). Data gathered on institutional challenges, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats serves as the basis for strategic decision-making. Final decisions made during leadership meetings strengthen proposed solutions and ensure accountable execution. At UNZAH, branding image evaluation is conducted through monthly leadership meetings, which include: (1) analysis of program progress; (2) identification of gaps between targets and actual outcomes; and (3) formulation of follow-up improvement measures (Mastamah et al., 2023). Evaluation is, at its core, the process of judging a program based on predetermined criteria and then making informed decisions (Ramadianti, 2023). Within Islamic higher education institutions, evaluation plays a critical role in brand image construction and program effectiveness enhancement (Anisa, 2022). In addition to formative and summative evaluations, the *assessment for learning* approach can also be applied to improve the learning process by involving students in evaluation, providing feedback, and facilitating self-assessment (Idris et al., 2020).

In branding image strategies, a transformation-based evaluation involves the determination of specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to assess strategic success, including aspects such as student satisfaction and long-term impact. Data is collected and analyzed systematically to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. Long-term impact evaluations are essential to gauge changes in reputation, educational quality, and the social effects of branding efforts. UNZAH Genggong and STDIIS Jember exhibit differing yet complementary evaluation emphases: UNZAH prioritizes the measurement of implementation outcomes, while STDIIS Jember applies multiple methods to assess satisfaction and broader impact. All approaches aim to ensure that Islamic higher education branding image accurately reflects institutional identity and meets stakeholder expectations.

4.4. Implications of Branding Image toward Competitive Advantage

The branding image strategies at UNZAH Genggong and STDIIS Jember have significant implications for enhancing institutional image and reputation. At UNZAH Genggong, the integration of local culture into both academic and non-academic activities reinforces the university's identity as an institution deeply rooted in local values. This approach attracts prospective students interested in cultural preservation, fosters campus community pride, and builds productive

partnerships with surrounding communities—ultimately strengthening the university's role and position within its social context. In contrast, STDIIS Jember emphasizes both local and global educational standards, improving the quality of education by adopting best practices that exceed domestic benchmarks. This strategy strikes a balance between local values and global demands while expanding educational access for the broader community. Moreover, awareness and appreciation of diversity within the campus environment are enhanced, fostering a more open and tolerant atmosphere toward various cultural and social backgrounds.

The implications of branding image strategies at Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong and Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i Jember include improved service quality and increased public trust. Enhanced service delivery creates a favorable impression among the public, students, and parents, thereby reinforcing the institutional image (Widodo & Maryama, 2021). A satisfied community is more likely to express trust and interest in the institution, often evidenced by increased enrollment despite reduced direct promotional activities (As'ad, 2020).

Furthermore, branding image strategies contribute to shaping students' moral character through flagship programs rooted in religious education (Anisa, 2022). Public trust in higher education institutions is a manifestation of the brand image being built and must be consistently maintained. Achieving competitive advantage requires branding strategies that are well-formulated, holistically implemented, and thoroughly evaluated—supported by in-depth analyses of institutional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Khasanah, 2023). Evaluation processes should also incorporate stakeholder feedback to enhance institutional reputation and strategy effectiveness (As'ad, 2020).

Effective branding image strategies at UNZAH and STDIIS positively impact the learning process and institutional reputation. Improvements in teaching and learning quality help identify areas for development and provide valuable feedback for continuous advancement. Indicators such as student satisfaction levels, academic achievements, and graduate employability reflect the success of the implemented strategies (Purnomo & Saputra, 2022).

Reputational gains also stem from innovative and transformational visions and missions, which elevate the institution's profile as a leader in education. Strengthening branding systems enhances institutional visibility among prospective students, parents, and society at large, while producing graduates with skills and knowledge aligned to market demands. Through expanded collaboration, institutions can broaden their networks, foster innovation, and deliver positive social impact. With well-designed and holistically evaluated strategies, Islamic private higher education institutions (PTKIS) can enhance their competitiveness on local, regional, and global levels.

Based on the research findings and discussion, the researcher proposes a conceptual framework of branding image strategy for achieving competitive advantage in Private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS). PTKIS refers to higher education institutions established by private entities under educational foundations, with a focus on Islamic sciences. From a governance perspective, PTKIS fall under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, through the Directorate General of Islamic Education (Ditjen Pendis).

The theory of *Balanced Reputation Management Strategy* underscores the importance of equilibrium values in reinforcing institutional standing within the education market. This strategic orientation enhances institutional appeal, strengthens reputation, and establishes competitive advantage.

Accordingly, the researcher formulates a synthesized concept of the *Balanced Reputation Management Strategy* for achieving competitive advantage, which incorporates a global approach

to broaden international competitiveness and the use of innovative digital technologies—all playing crucial roles in reinforcing institutional branding. This concept is illustrated in the following scheme:
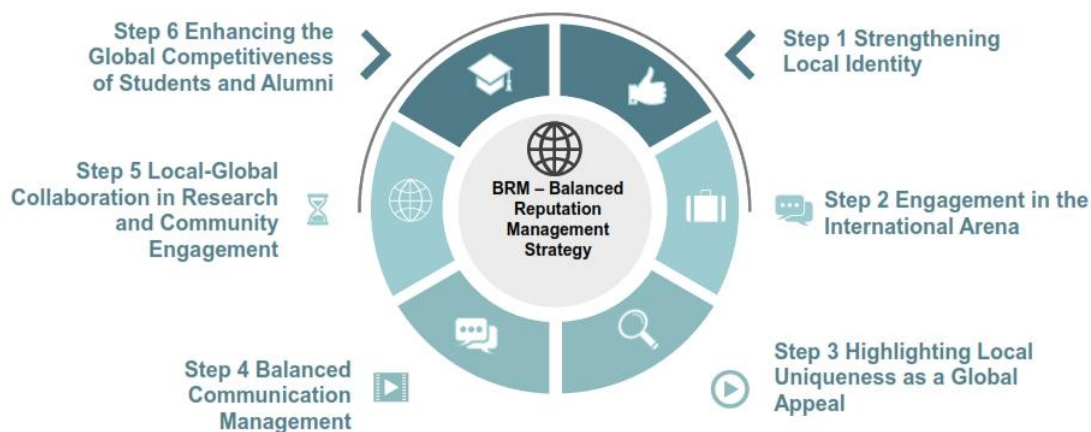
Figure 1. Balanced Reputation Management

The implementation of the *Balanced Reputation Management* concept in higher education institutions (HEIs) involves strategies aimed at maintaining equilibrium between local achievements and global recognition. This concept emphasizes efforts to preserve the institution's local identity and strengths while continuously enhancing its image and competitiveness on the international stage. The following are key steps in the implementation process:

4.4.1. Strengthening Local Identity

HEIs should actively highlight their contributions to the local community through academic activities, research, and community service. This can include:

a. Academic programs aligned with local needs, such as cultural studies, local languages, or regional agricultural systems.
b. Institutional engagement in local development projects related to education, health, or the local economy.

Internal and external branding and communications should reflect the local values that form the institution's distinctive identity. Implementation**:** Conducting research projects that support regional or local economic development; organizing community service initiatives addressing social issues in the areas surrounding the campus.

4.4.2. Participation on the Global Stage

HEIs must actively promote their global accomplishments through international publications, academic collaborations, and recognition at the global level. Steps to strengthen international reputation include:

a. Establishing partnerships with foreign universities and institutions via double-degree programs, student exchanges, or joint research initiatives.
b. Encouraging faculty and researchers to participate in international conferences and publish in high-impact journals.

Implementation: Promoting international research conducted by university faculty at global forums; hosting international seminars featuring experts from various countries.

4.4.3. Highlighting Local Uniqueness as a Global Attraction

An institution's local excellence—such as its cultural heritage, arts, or indigenous knowledge—can serve as a unique appeal to international students. This can be achieved through:
a. Offering study programs that integrate local culture with global perspectives (e.g., traditional arts, sustainable natural resource management).
b. Promoting cultural events and festivals as part of the international student experience.

Implementation: Designing academic programs on traditional Indonesian arts for international students; inviting international students to participate in local cultural activities as part of campus integration initiatives.

4.4.4. Balanced Communication Management

Effective and consistent communication is critical in managing institutional reputation. HEIs must maintain a balance in communicating both local accomplishments and global excellence. This includes:
a. Developing marketing content that integrates local and global achievements, disseminated through the university's website, social media, and promotional brochures.
b. Showcasing the achievements of students, alumni, and faculty who contribute at both local and international levels.

Implementation: Launching social media campaigns that highlight local accomplishments and international engagements simultaneously; promoting alumni success stories that reflect global contributions rooted in local values.

4.4.5. Local-Global Collaboration in Research and Community Engagement

HEIs can integrate local and global priorities through collaborative projects that generate local impact but are globally recognized. This includes:
a. Research addressing global issues with local applications, such as climate change, global health, or environmental sustainability.
b. Involving international institutions in local community service initiatives, facilitating knowledge transfer from global to local contexts.

Implementation: Developing research projects on sustainable agriculture implemented within local communities in collaboration with international universities; organizing international conferences that address globally relevant issues rooted in local challenges, such as disaster management in high-risk regions.

4.4.6. Enhancing Student and Alumni Competitiveness at the Local and Global Levels

HEIs must support their students in becoming competitive in both local and global job markets by offering adaptive curricula and globally oriented skill training. This includes developing internship programs in both local and multinational companies, and preparing students with digital skills and soft skills aligned with global standards.

Implementation**:** Offering internship programs with multinational corporations or global startups that address local issues; organizing language and cross-cultural communication training for both local and international students.

The implementation of *Balanced Reputation Management* in higher education entails an integrated strategy that promotes local identity while enhancing global competitiveness. This includes reinforcing local contributions, promoting international achievements, curating unique campus experiences, and managing communication in a balanced and effective manner. Through these strategic efforts, higher education institutions can establish a robust and appealing reputation both nationally and globally.

5. Conclusion

This study examines branding image strategies as a pathway to achieving competitive advantage in two Private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS): Universitas Islam Zainul Hasan Genggong (UNZAH) and Sekolah Tinggi Dirasat Islamiyah Imam Syafi'i (STDIIS) Jember. Employing a multi-case study approach and cross-site analysis techniques, the findings reveal that although each institution adopts a distinct approach—local for UNZAH and global for STDIIS—both have succeeded in constructing a strong and competitive institutional image through contextual and consistent branding strategies.

Conceptually, this study formulates the Balanced Reputation Management Strategy model as a synthesis of field findings. This model underscores the importance of harmonizing local identity reinforcement with global presence in shaping institutional positioning. The model is built upon four core dimensions: characteristics, strategic implementation, evaluation, and implications of branding image. In practice, the effectiveness of this strategy is reflected in increased student attraction, public trust, and the expansion of both local and international partnership networks.

This study significantly addresses the central question of how PTKIS can develop competitive advantage through distinctive and transformative branding approaches. Value-based strategies grounded in Islamic principles, when combined with innovation and adaptability, are proven to enhance institutional visibility and competitiveness at both national and international levels.

However, this study is limited by its scope, focusing only on two PTKIS located in East Java. Furthermore, the evaluation of branding success heavily relies on internal stakeholder perceptions, making the findings potentially variable in response to external dynamics and national policy changes.

The implications for practitioners in Islamic higher education are that the Balanced Reputation Management model can serve as a strategic framework for designing long-term approaches that are not only responsive to local and global dynamics but also grounded in institutional values, context, and vision. For the academic community, these findings open avenues for further research on the long-term impact of branding strategies on institutional sustainability, graduate competitiveness, and global academic reputation.

For future research, it is recommended to broaden the scope to include other PTKIS across various regions using quantitative or mixed-method approaches, in order to test the validity and replicability of the model in more diverse contexts. Investigating the relationship between branding effectiveness and institutional performance indicators (such as accreditation, graduate employability, and curriculum innovation) is also a crucial agenda that may strengthen the theoretical and practical foundations of branding strategies in Islamic higher education.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Poppy Rachman served as the main and corresponding author, leading the research and writing. Munirul Abidin contributed to data collection and analysis. Moh. Achmad Khudori Soleh assisted in the literature review and preparation of research materials. Ali Murfi provided support in the data interpretation and manuscript revision.

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Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Interest's statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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