



Strategic Construction of Brand Image by the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara in Strengthening Public Trust

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Abstract: The construction of brand image has become a strategic imperative for Islamic higher education institutions in the era of global competition. Prior research has examined the impact of educational institutional branding on academic performance (Karsono et al., 2021). However, a gap remains regarding the explicit integration of Islamic values into science and technology branding. This study aims to explore the brand image strategies of the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN North Sumatra in building public trust. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with purposive sampling, involving five key informants: the Dean of FST, the Vice Dean III, the Head of Administrative Affairs, and two students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. The research findings identify four strategic pillars: (1) leadership-student synergy in digital dissemination representing the concept of syura; (2) integration of the wahdatul ulum paradigm and rahmatan lil alamin principle in inclusive service delivery; (3) optimization of the official website as an instrument of transparency; (4) consistency in multi-stakeholder communication. Thus, it can be understood that a branding model harmonizing academic excellence with Islamic values in the science-technology context serves as a competitive differentiator, enriching the strategic branding literature of Islamic higher education and demonstrating that authentic integration of religious values strengthens institutional positioning at national and global levels.

Keywords: Brand Image; Branding Strategy; Islamic Higher Education; Islam-Science Integration; Public Trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information technology has become a strategic tool for shaping the image of higher education institutions in the digital era. Higher education institutions no longer function solely as centers of education and research; they must also attract attention and gain public trust as primary determinants of institutional success (Akbarjono, 2017).

The Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara is committed to integrating Islamic values with science and technology, bridging these domains with Islamic principles to encourage students to apply competencies ethically and responsibly in responding to social problems. Since its establishment in 2015, the faculty has experienced significant development through the construction of laboratory infrastructure and the digitalization of academic services, aimed at enhancing efficiency, competitiveness, and responsiveness to professional demands amid competition among higher education institutions.

In an increasingly intensive competitive landscape, brand image strategy has become a crucial element in strengthening institutional identity (Atin et al., 2023). Brand image is constructed to facilitate consumer recognition and product selection (Wasesa, 2011) while simultaneously representing perceptions and impressions embedded in consumers' memories that ultimately influence their behavior (Susanto et al., 2022). In the context of higher

education, brand image is not limited to commercial value but also encompasses building public trust through the provision of quality services, relevant academic programs, and international collaboration. The expectation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia that State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) possess a robust brand image reflects a commitment to compete nationally and globally without neglecting Islamic identity, as conveyed at the National Forum of Deans of Science and Technology PTKIN on 5–8 June 2024 (FST UINSU, 2024).

The formation of brand image is a longitudinal process that demands consistency and competitive excellence. Educational institutions need to demonstrate sustained achievements because positive user impressions represent trust, satisfaction, and loyalty that drive mutualistic collaboration (Anggraini & Putri, 2022). To position themselves as providers of public services that meet societal expectations, educational institutions must strengthen academic activities and international collaboration. The findings of Karsono et al. (2021) indicate that branding strategies at MTsN Purbalingga were implemented by improving academic and non-academic performance, character development, encouraging achievement and community service, and optimizing services provided by teachers and educational personnel.

Research on the branding strategy of the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara becomes urgent given its strategic role in Islamic higher education amid the currents of technological globalization. An effective branding strategy is expected not only to build public trust through enhanced academic quality, character development, and optimal services, but also to consolidate the faculty's position as a center for integrating scientific knowledge and Islamic values. This relevance justifies a study entitled "Strategi Branding Image Fakultas Sains dan Teknologi UINSU dalam Membangun Kepercayaan Publik."

The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in the concept of strategy as a set of fundamental decisions and actions taken by top management to achieve organizational objectives (Purwanggono, 2021), while also functioning as an integrated guideline in determining actions so that activities proceed in accordance with objectives (Nazarudin, 2020). Morrisey in Munir & Ma'sum (2022) emphasizes that strategy is a component of strategic thinking that incorporates organizational values, vision, and mission, and that it helps determine the organization's future direction, products, services, and markets. Thus, strategy can be conceptualized as a holistic instrument that integrates all organizational elements to achieve success.

Brand image or brand reputation is related to attitudes, beliefs, and preferences toward a particular brand. Brands that successfully build a positive image are more likely to encourage

consumer purchase decisions. Kotler and Armstrong define brand image as a set of beliefs, impressions, and ideas held by individuals about an object, which constitutes a collection of interconnected perceptions within human cognition about a specific brand (Chalil et al., 2021). The formation of brand image requires a continuous process, and educational institutions must build positive impressions through achievements and competitive excellence, because positive user experiences represent trust, satisfaction, and loyalty that facilitate mutualistic collaboration (Anggraini & Putri, 2022).

Public trust is a vital element in securing substantive societal support for government and public organizations to enhance policy performance and implementation. Yamagishi, in Hakim et al. (2012), defines trust as an individual's belief in others' goodwill, concern for rights, and the fulfillment of obligations. Trust becomes a key element in obtaining and maintaining customer loyalty (Yulinda & Iskandar, 2022). Mowen & Minor (2002) explain that consumer trust is formed through knowledge and evaluation of the characteristics and benefits of products or services. Putnam in Dwiyanto (2011) adds that trust also grows through active community participation in social activities, thereby strengthening mutual trust among individuals and toward institutions.

2. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive design to explore the branding image strategy of the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara to build public trust. The research was conducted at the Faculty of Science and Technology, UIN Sumatera Utara, at Jalan Lapangan Golf, Durian Jangak, Kecamatan Tuntungan, with the implementation period from May to November 2024.

The selection of research informants was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, with consideration given to the relevance of their positions and their direct involvement in the faculty branding process. Five key informants were selected, consisting of the Dean of FST, the strategic policy decision-maker; the Vice Dean III, responsible for student affairs and cooperation; the Head of Administrative Affairs, representing administrative implementers; and two students representing the perspectives of service users and digital dissemination agents.

Data collection was conducted through source triangulation encompassing primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants, participatory observation, and documentation of faculty branding activities. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected from various academic sources, including books, scientific

journals, undergraduate theses, master's theses, dissertations, and institutional documents such as faculty profiles, activity reports, and official website content.

3. HESULT

The research findings reveal that the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara implements a comprehensive and integrated brand image strategy through four interconnected strategic pillars. These four pillars, namely leadership–student synergy, the integration of Islamic values, optimization of digital platforms, and consistency of multi-stakeholder communication, are grounded in the wahdatul ulum paradigm and the principle of rahmatan lil alamin as philosophical foundations that distinguish FST from conventional higher education institutions. The implementation of these four pillars is not independent; rather, they form a holistic branding ecosystem in which each element mutually reinforces the others to construct a distinctive institutional identity.

The process of brand image construction occurs through enhanced transparency, reputation amplification, public perception management, and trust consolidation, ultimately yielding three main strategic outcomes: public trust building, competitive positioning, and sustainable excellence. The resulting branding model demonstrates how the authentic integration of Islamic values with academic excellence can serve as a strategic differentiator, strengthening institutional legitimacy at both the national and global levels, while simultaneously creating a continuous improvement loop that ensures faculty adaptability and responsiveness to contemporary dynamics. The detailed explanation regarding the implementation of the brand image strategy is as follows:

Brand Image Strategy of the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

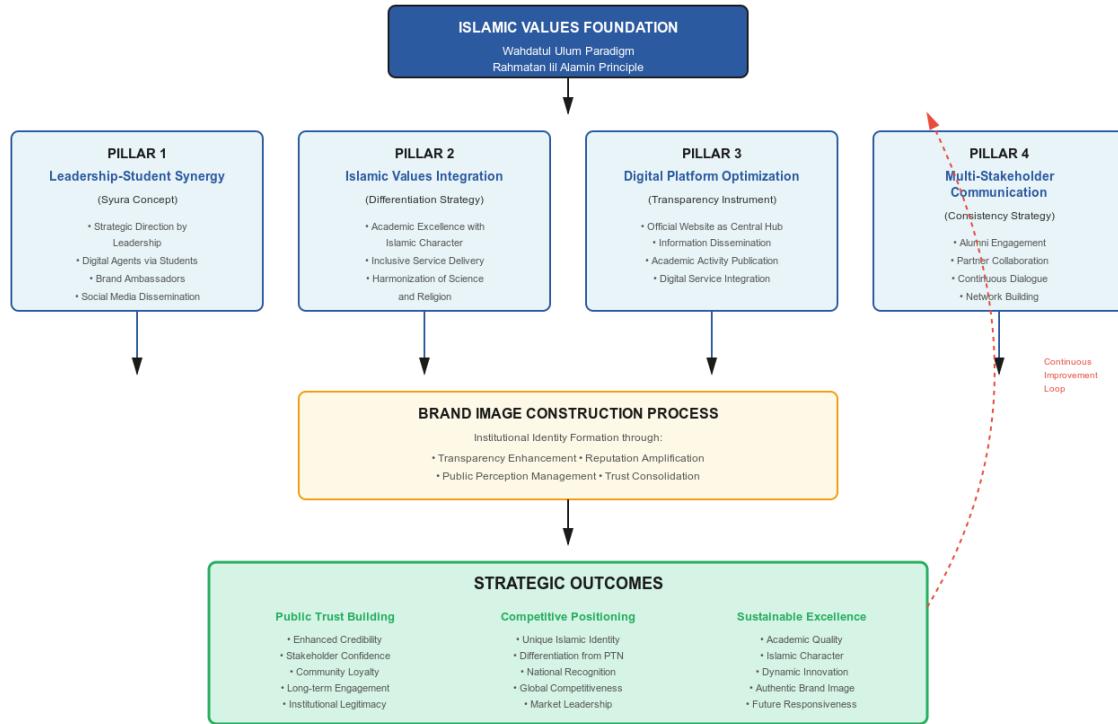


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Brand Image Construction at FST UIN Sumatera Utara.

The Dean of FST, Dr. Zulham S. HI, M. Hum., underscored the strategic significance of utilizing the official websites of the faculty and study programs as primary instruments in institutional branding activities. These digital platforms serve to disseminate comprehensive information on faculty activities, lecturer productivity, and student participation, thereby enhancing transparency and consolidating public trust. This strategy contributes to strengthening FST's image as a dynamic, credible, and Islamically rooted higher education institution. In his interview, he stated: "Because in this case, it strongly supports the branding and promotion activities of the faculty. As far as I know, we coordinate these matters through the websites of the study programs or the faculty. Well, collaboration with external parties, then the activities of lecturers, students, and study programs, we publish on our website, both at the study program level and on the faculty website." (10 September 2024)

The interview with the Vice Dean III, Prof. Dr. Achyar Zein, M.Ag., revealed that students occupy a strategic position in shaping brand image through activities on social media and institutional websites. As brand ambassadors, students utilize digital platforms to promote the campus and to express academic culture and inclusive Islamic values. This phenomenon reflects FST UIN Sumatera Utara's awareness of the urgency of digital media and of students'

contributions to shaping public perception. He emphasized: "The leadership is involved in branding, and students also play a role, especially on social media and on their respective websites." (29 October 2024). Further confirmation was obtained from an interview with Awal, a student of the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara, which shows that students actively participate in building the faculty's brand image through social media, including the official accounts of the Himpunan Mahasiswa Jurusan (HMJ). "From our HMJ account we are continuously active, such as notifying about activities and informing about important days." (29 October 2024)

The research findings indicate that the synergy between leadership and students at FST UIN Sumatera Utara plays a central role in consolidating the faculty's brand image. Leadership does not merely direct branding strategies in a top-down manner; it also facilitates the active involvement of all elements of the academic community in constructing a robust institutional identity. The leadership serves as a catalyst, ensuring the progressive development of the faculty's quality and reputation in alignment with public expectations. The Dean of the Faculty, Dr. Zulham S. HI, M. Hum., emphasized the crucial role of leadership in orchestrating branding strategies, including responsibility for curating and publishing academic activities on the faculty website, which serves as a strategic instrument to enhance transparency and public trust.

By routinely publishing academic activities, lecturer productivity, and student participation, FST can amplify its reputation as a professional and transparent institution. On a complementary dimension, students also play a vital role in constructing positive perceptions of the faculty through social media by proactively disseminating information regarding faculty activities and expressing the inclusive and participatory values that constitute the distinctive characteristics of FST UIN Sumatera Utara. This participation not only broadens the reach of the faculty's communication but also strengthens the faculty's image as an institution that harmonizes Islamic values with science and technology within a dynamic academic ecosystem.

Collaboration between leadership and students embodies the concept of syura in Islam, which emphasizes deliberation and cooperation in building the faculty's brand image. In this configuration, leadership provides strategic direction through formal channels such as the institutional website. At the same time, students serve as digital agents on social media to reach a wider, more diverse audience. This synergy consolidates the identity of FST UIN Sumatera Utara as an institution that prioritizes academic excellence and is committed to inclusive, dynamic, and responsive Islamic values in the context of contemporary transformation, thereby creating an authentic and sustainable brand image.

Brand Image Integration of Islamic Values into Brand Image

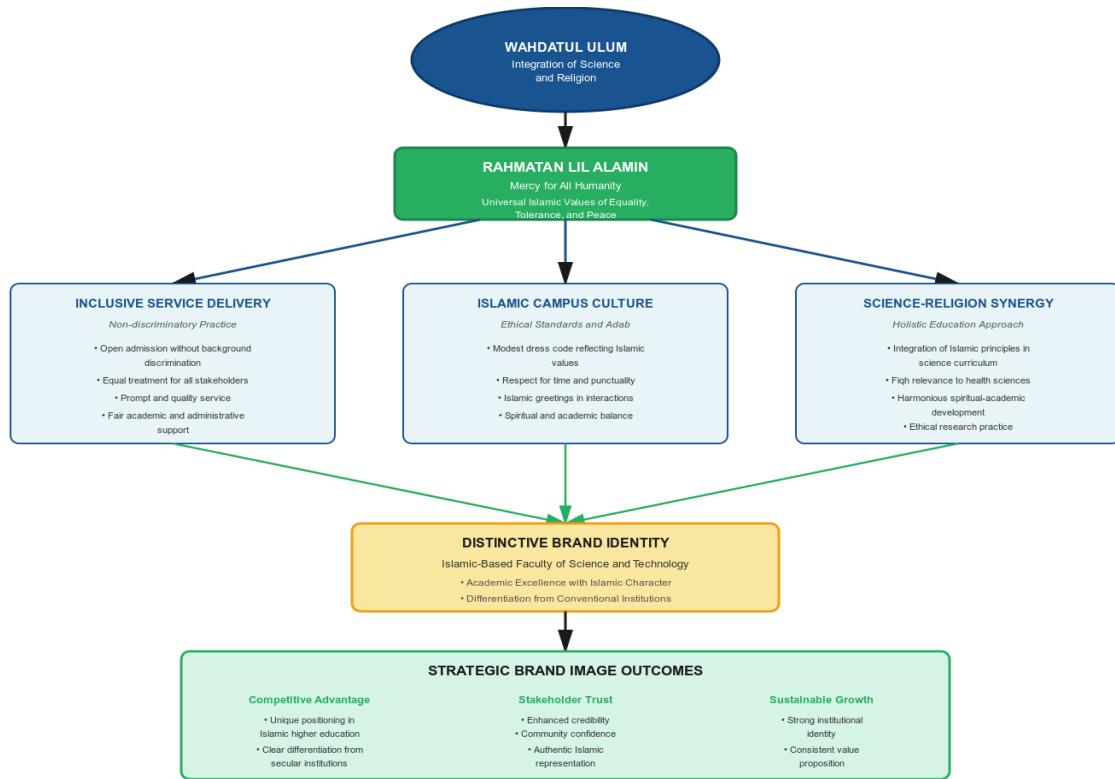


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Islamic Value Integration in Faculty Brand Image FST UIN Sumatera Utara.

The Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) at UIN Sumatera Utara applies Islamic values within its academic identity to enhance brand image. The objective of this effort is not only to differentiate the faculty from other educational institutions, but also to demonstrate that religion and science can progress together. This strengthens the image of SAINTEK as a faculty grounded in Islamic values that remain relevant, linking academic and moral achievements for societal contribution.

The integration of Islamic values is also reflected in the public services provided by FST UIN SU to stakeholders without discrimination. This means that FST UIN SU serves anyone who registers, regardless of background, which is consistent with Islamic service principles. This statement was conveyed by Prof. Dr. Achyar Zein, M.Ag (Vice Dean III of FST UIN SU) in the following interview excerpt: "We do not look at things such as whether we are Islamic and so on. Whoever comes here will still be served. Moreover, we do not make that a written rule. Because our experience so far is that they are polite. Actually, it is simple, as long as the service is not delayed and we serve them properly according to the time needed, that is Islamic." (29 October 2024)

FST UIN Sumatera Utara applies inclusive Islamic values as a form of rahmatan lil alamin, which is reflected in open and non-discriminatory communication. Institutional branding is evident in campus culture that upholds Islamic etiquette, such as dress codes and respect for time, even though these are not always formally codified in regulations. This was conveyed by Abdul Karim, one of the students of FST UIN SU, in the following interview: "There are no written rules. For example, during break time, do not come in. Then you have to wear shoes, and especially for men, trousers, goalkeeper trousers are not allowed, not jeans, and this applies to all lecturers. However, for women, it is just that clothes should not be tight." (29 October 2024).

In addition, the application of Islamic principles in services, including rules of modest dress in accordance with Islamic teachings and the use of greetings in administrative interactions, reflects the identity of an Islamic university. This was expressed by Mrs. Dra. Zakiah Lubis, MA, Head of Administrative Affairs of FST UIN SU, in the following interview: "From the aspect of clothing, we always emphasize that women should not wear jeans, but because saintek uses trousers it is allowed, except that some lecturers prohibit it, and for men, if they wear jeans we also prohibit it." (29 October 2024)

The Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara implements a distinctive branding strategy by integrating Islamic values into its academic identity and daily activities. This approach distinguishes FST UIN SU from similar faculties by affirming that science and religion can synergize within a holistic educational environment. Through the concept of wahdatul ulum, the faculty harmonizes students' academic and spiritual development in a balanced manner.

According to the Vice Dean III, Prof. Dr. Achyar Zein, M.Ag., the integration of Islamic values into branding strategy is very important because science and religion must be interconnected to address the challenges of the times. For example, the study of fiqh is relevant to health and medicine, demonstrating the close relationship between religious studies and science. This approach strengthens the position of science and technology within an Islamic framework, while simultaneously forming a comprehensive and balanced paradigm of Islamic education. The integration of Islamic values into institutional marketing also fosters a strong, consistent faculty identity.

The Islamic principle of rahmatan lil alamin is applied by FST UIN Sumatera Utara in the curriculum and in inclusive public services. This faculty provides academic and administrative services fairly to all individuals without discrimination, reflecting Islamic values that uphold equality, tolerance, and peace. As explained by Prof. Dr. Achyar Zein, the

application of this principle is reflected in an open attitude and equitable service. By prioritizing these values, FST UIN SU not only excels academically but also demonstrates a face of Islam that is compassionate and beneficial to all.

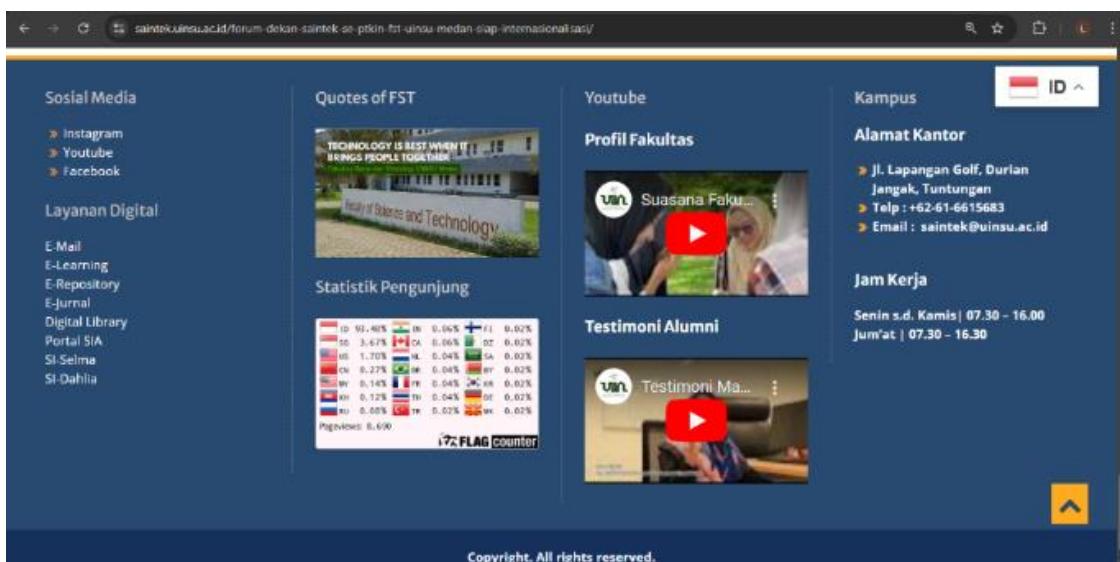
The Role of the Official Website in Brand Image and in Enhancing Public Trust

The official website of FST UIN Sumatera Utara plays a strategic role in building reputation and public trust by disseminating academic information, student activities, and scholarly publications. Beyond functioning as an information medium, the site also serves as a branding instrument that introduces the faculty and its Islamic values. Interactive features, a simple design, and digital services such as the academic portal and e-learning further enhance accessibility and user engagement.

The Dean of FST UIN Sumatera Utara, Dr. Zulham S. HI, M. Hum, in his interview stated that the official website has an important role in faculty branding and promotion: “Because in this case it strongly supports faculty branding and promotional activities. As far as I know, we carry out activities that coordinate these efforts, especially through the websites owned by study programs or the faculty. Then collaboration with external parties, followed by the activities of lecturers, students, and study programs, are published on our website, both at the program level and on the faculty website.” (10 September 2024)

The official website of FST UIN Sumatera Utara not only serves as an information portal for the faculty but also showcases various academic and non-academic activities that reflect the faculty's dynamism and achievements. In alignment with Islamic values, the site also disseminates beneficial information for the academic community and the wider public. In addition, the website provides digital services, including financial applications, academic systems, and electronic signatures, that flexibly support academic and administrative needs. Ibu Dra conveyed this. Zakiah Lubis, MA, Head of Administration of FST UIN Sumatera Utara, in an interview.

“Here we already have many applications. For finance there is si mona, for academics there is dahlia, there is sia, there is si Selma. Then now, if the Dean is not available, we have TTE. Even if my staff are not in the office, although now there is no longer WFH, in fact they can still do their work from anywhere.” (29 October 2024)



Gambar 3. List of Digital Services on the Website of the Faculty of Science and Technology, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara.

As shown in the third figure above, the website of the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara provides a wide range of academic and non-academic information, including news, announcements, faculty profiles, study programs, and digital services. The site is built on WordPress using the "Education Hub" theme and features fairly comprehensive navigation. Its design is simple, with a primary focus on functionality. The website also provides links to internal services, including the academic portal, e-learning platform, and institutional repository.

The visual design of the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara is relatively simple and functional; however, it remains less modern and less aesthetically engaging. Monotonous color schemes, a static layout, and inconsistent spacing and margins are important areas for improvement. The adoption of a more contemporary design, supplemented by visual elements such as icons, images, videos, and infographics, could enhance user engagement and clarify information delivery. Although access to the academic portal and e-learning platform is already available, there are still opportunities to expand digital academic services further.

In terms of functionality, the website's navigation for the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara is fairly well organized, but interactivity has not been fully optimized. Although the site functions properly, the user experience could be improved through design refinement, increased interactivity, and the incorporation of personalization elements to make it more appealing and accessible.

In the current digital era, an official website has become the primary public face of a higher education institution in its interactions with various stakeholders. A website does not merely serve as a medium for conveying information; it also reflects an institution's identity, professionalism, and quality in the eyes of the public. For the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, developing an effective and engaging website is a strategic necessity to strengthen the institutional image.

A high-quality university website should integrate essential elements, including visual elements that reflect institutional identity and informative, relevant content. At Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, an Islamic higher education institution, the website also plays a crucial role in communicating Islamic values. Based on an evaluation of the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, several aspects can be optimized to enhance the site's quality and attractiveness. These aspects are as follows:

First, Logo and Color: The selection of colors on a university website plays a significant role in shaping a strong visual identity, even without reliance on a logo. The logo itself constitutes an important asset that differentiates a university and reinforces its image in society (Fahminnansih et al., 2022). The website of Saintek Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara uses blue as a branding element symbolizing peace and tranquility, thereby creating a conducive atmosphere for learning. However, the current combination of blue and white appears monotonous. The addition of variations of blue could enrich the visual appearance, enhance attractiveness, and create a more pleasant user experience.

Color Palette

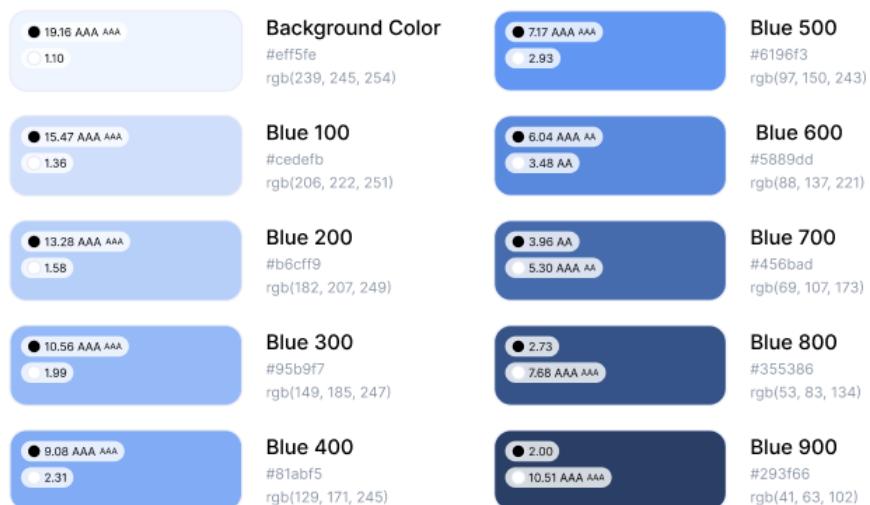


Figure 4. Example of a Blue Color Palette.

Second, Typography and Layout: As shown in the fourth figure above, the FST UIN Sumatera Utara website employs a simple, formal style that facilitates readability across devices, with consistent font sizes and styles that create a professional impression. However, the layout design, which tends to be static and contains minimal interactive elements, renders the visual appearance less dynamic. In fact, according to Ainnayah (2020), layout is the first aspect to attract user attention, followed by content. The addition of more varied visual elements, including animation, could enhance the sense of modernity and user engagement; therefore, further refinement of the design remains necessary to align with current trends.

Third, Dean's Welcome Message: Displaying the Dean's welcome message on the website helps visitors understand the faculty's vision, mission, and values. Moreover, this message can strengthen emotional ties with students and provide important information for prospective students. The presence of such a welcome message can increase interaction and reinforce a positive campus image.

Fourth, Content as a Brand Message Introduction: Content related to study programs, academic activities, and the latest news plays a crucial role in presenting the strengths and values of the Faculty of Science and Technology UINSU. This information helps prospective students and parents understand the quality of the education offered. However, the website has not yet fully highlighted unique values such as flagship programs or research innovations that could serve as distinguishing features. To maintain a positive image, regular updates of academic and technological information are required to keep the site active and relevant.

Fifth, Testimonials and Alumni Stories: Displaying alums testimonials on the website can provide an overview of their experiences during their studies and the impact of education on their career success. These testimonials can also motivate prospective students and build pride among the academic community. At present, the absence of testimonials from alums, students, and partners represents an untapped opportunity to strengthen the campus image and reputation.

Sixth, Adding Lecturer NIP, Lecturer Names, and Lecturer Photos: Displaying lecturer profiles complete with NIP, names, and photos makes it easier for students and visitors to recognize the teaching staff. This information enhances transparency, credibility, and faculty professionalism, while also strengthening the initial relationship between students and lecturers, reflecting the faculty's commitment to providing high-quality educators.

Seventh, Website Taskbar Navigation: The navigation taskbar on the Saintek UIN Sumatera Utara website is not "sticky", so it disappears when the page is scrolled downward, reducing user convenience. A "sticky" taskbar feature would facilitate menu access without the

need to scroll back up, thereby improving efficiency and user comfort. This improvement would also create a more professional and modern impression, strengthening the faculty's image and credibility in the eyes of visitors.

Eighth, adding a Location and Floor Plan Menu: Adding a "Faculty Location/Floor Plan" menu on the FST UIN Sumatera Utara website would make it easier for visitors to identify the locations of rooms and available facilities. The integration of interactive map features, such as a 360-degree camera or Google Maps, could provide real-time visualization of the building layout. This innovation would be highly beneficial for new students and first-time visitors, enhancing accessibility and the faculty's positive image.

Ninth, adding Islamic Greetings as Part of Islamic identity. This element can create a personal impression and a sense of comfort for users. In addition, the inclusion of periodic positive messages, such as weekend greetings that incorporate elements of gratitude and prayer, reflects concern for the spiritual dimension and enriches the digital experience grounded in Islamic values.

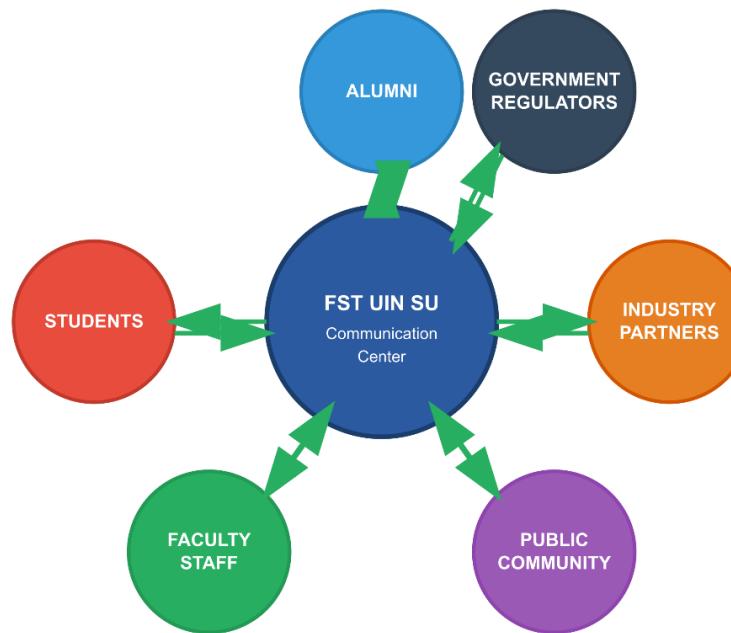
Vision and Mission as the Foundation for Building Brand Image

The vision and mission of the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara constitute the principal foundation for constructing a brand image oriented toward excellence in science and technology grounded in Islamic values. of Islamic Branding: The official website of the Faculty of Science and Technology UIN Sumatera Utara should ideally begin with an Islamic greeting such as "Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh" as a form of welcome and reinforcement. The faculty is committed to producing graduates who are academically outstanding and endowed with Islamic character through the implementation of the tridharma perguruan tinggi and the wahdatul ulum approach, which harmoniously integrates scientific knowledge with Islamic principles.

In an interview with the Dean of the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Dr. Zulham S. HI, M. Hum., it was conveyed that the faculty's vision and mission serve as the primary reference point in building public trust: "With regard to the faculty's vision and mission in creating or building a brand image, of course we relate it to the faculty's own vision. We have a vision to excel in the field of environmental science and technology with the paradigm of wahdatul ulum in the year 2030. Our mission is to carry out the tridharma perguruan tinggi also with wahdatul ulum. Therefore, the brand image that we want to build for the faculty is a brand image that leads us toward excellence in the field of environmental science and technology." (10 September 2024)

The imaging strategy implemented is intended to strengthen public trust in the faculty's commitment to upholding the tridharma perguruan tinggi in alignment with Islamic values, thereby consolidating the Faculty of Science and Technology's position as an excellent and trustworthy educational institution.

Consistency of Communication with Stakeholders



CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Digital Platform • Annual Events • Transparent Dialogue
Continuous Engagement • Technology Adaptation • Responsive Service

OUTCOMES: Public Trust • Positive Reputation Unique Positioning • Sustainable Growth

Figure 5. Stakeholder Communication Model FST UIN Sumatera Utara.

As illustrated in Figure 5 above, consistent communication between the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara and its stakeholders is pivotal in shaping a positive image and strengthening public trust. Based on an interview with the Dean of FST, Dr. Zulham S. HI, M. Hum., sustained communication with diverse parties constitutes a core strategic approach: "About strategies for enhancing public trust through the faculty's brand image, of course, we carry out consistent communication with many stakeholders. This is to ensure that such communication provides our stakeholders with confidence that the quality of our alums, our lecturers, and the facilities we possess indeed deliver excellent services. This is also related to our positive reputation, particularly in the online world." (10 September 2024)

The faculty leverages digital platforms to reinforce its distinctive institutional positioning by integrating Islamic values, thereby differentiating itself from other state universities. Prof. Dr. Achyar Zein, M.Ag., added that the faculty maintains contact with alums, both those already employed and those not yet employed, and facilitates mutual support and information sharing among them through annual activities. This transparent, continuous, and responsive communication has become the key through which FST builds a positive reputation as an institution that integrates science, technology, and Islamic values. Furthermore, the faculty continuously adapts to technological developments and evolving communication trends in order to remain relevant and competitive, positioning itself as a unique and flexible institution.

Alums play a strategic role in strengthening the reputation of educational institutions (Madihah, 2021). The Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara cultivates positive relationships with its alums through annual activities and sustained communication networks. The role of alums not only supports the institutional image in the public sphere but also contributes to graduates' career development. This strategy reflects the faculty's responsiveness to the dynamic needs of its stakeholders.

Overall, this study's findings demonstrate that the Faculty of Science and Technology at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara has implemented a comprehensive, multidimensional branding strategy to build public trust. The synergy between strategic leadership, active student participation, the integration of Islamic values through the paradigm of wahdatul ulum, the optimization of digital platforms, and the consistency of communication with stakeholders forms a holistic and sustainable branding ecosystem. Nevertheless, an evaluation of the official website indicates significant room for improvement in visual design, interactivity, and content curation to maximize the impact of digital communication. The faculty's commitment to harmonizing academic excellence with inclusive Islamic values, supported by a clear vision toward 2030, positions FST at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara as a distinctive institution of higher education with a strong identity capable of competing at both national and international levels. The branding strategy not only strengthens the institutional image but also builds a solid foundation of public trust through transparency, professionalism, and consistency in implementing the tridharma of higher education, oriented toward universal Islamic values.

Discussion

This research demonstrates that the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara implements a comprehensive branding strategy to build public trust through several strategic approaches. The main findings indicate that the integration of Islamic values

constitutes the principal distinguishing feature of FST compared with similar faculties at other public universities.

The branding strategy implemented by FST UIN Sumatera Utara aligns with the concept proposed by Morrisey in Munir & Ma'sum (2022), namely that strategy is part of strategic thinking encompassing organizational values, vision, and mission. The faculty's vision to become excellent in environmental science and technology, grounded in the Wahdatul Ulum paradigm, serves as the foundation for all branding activities undertaken. This approach demonstrates that brand image is not formed instantaneously, but rather through a long-term process as explained by Anggraini & Putri (2022).

Collaboration between leadership and students in building brand image reflects the implementation of a holistic strategy. The leadership serves as a catalyst by publishing activities on the official website, while students actively serve as digital ambassadors on social media. This collaborative pattern indicates that branding is not solely the responsibility of top management but involves all faculty members. This is consistent with the findings of Karsono et al. (2021), which show that effective branding strategies require improvements in the quality of academic and non-academic performance as well as optimal services from the entire academic community.

The integration of Islamic values into academic identity is a distinctive feature that strengthens FST's positioning. The application of the principle of rahmatan lil alamin in inclusive, non-discriminatory public services demonstrates that brand image does not focus solely on commercial value but also on building trust through quality services. This finding reinforces Wasesa's (2011) argument that brand image facilitates consumers' recognition and selection of products, thereby helping prospective students understand an institution's uniqueness.

The official website has proven to be a strategic tool for FST's digital branding. However, the evaluation indicates significant room for improvement, particularly in visual design, interactivity, and content. This finding confirms the importance of information technology as a strategic tool in building the image of higher education institutions in the digital era, as stated by Akbarjono (2017). The recommended improvements include optimizing color schemes, implementing a dynamic layout, adding alum testimonials, and integrating Islamic branding elements, such as a welcoming greeting.

Consistency in communication with stakeholders through digital platforms demonstrates the faculty's awareness of the importance of building long-term trust. This is in line with the concept of trust proposed by Mowen & Minor (2002), which holds that consumer trust is

formed through knowledge and evaluation of a product or service's characteristics and benefits. In the context of FST, continuous communication through the website and social media helps showcase the quality of alums, lecturers, and facilities to the public.

Although FST's branding strategy is moving in the right direction, several aspects still require refinement. The absence of alum testimonials and the lack of emphasis on flagship programs on the website indicate opportunities that have not been optimally utilized. In fact, as explained by Susanto et al. (2022), brand image reflects perceptions and impressions held in consumers' minds and can influence their behavior. The addition of these elements could strengthen the faculty's positive image and enhance its attractiveness to prospective students.

Overall, FST UIN Sumatera Utara's branding strategy demonstrates a sound integration of Islamic values and academic development. However, it still needs optimization in digital communication and visual branding to achieve stronger positioning amid competition among higher education institutions.

4. CONCLUSION

This research identifies that the brand image strategy of the Faculty of Science and Technology at UIN Sumatera Utara is constructed through a multidimensional approach that integrates institutional collaboration, differentiation of Islamic values, and the utilization of digital platforms. The findings indicate that the synergy between strategic leadership and the active participation of all elements of the academic community creates a cohesive branding ecosystem, in which leadership serves as the architect of reputational policy. At the same time, students act as agents of digital dissemination.

The integration of Islamic values through the wahdatul ulum paradigm has proven to be a fundamental differentiator, positioning FST distinctly within the higher education landscape. The manifestation of the principle of rahmatan lil alamin in inclusive services not only strengthens the institution's religious identity but also shapes public perceptions of the faculty's commitment to academic excellence grounded in Islamic ethics.

The official website serves as a strategic instrument for mediating institutional transparency and building public legitimacy by curating academic content, publishing achievements, and making digital services accessible. However, optimizing visual elements, interactivity, and narrative content remains necessary to maximize the impact of digital communication in shaping a strong brand perception.

The faculty's vision, oriented toward excellence in environmental science and technology, and the foundation of Wahdatul Ulum in 2030, provide a strategic framework that

guides all branding initiatives toward clear positioning. Consistency in communication with stakeholders across multiple digital touchpoints has proven essential for cultivating trust, fostering engagement, and sustaining institutional reputation in the long term.

The theoretical implications of this research enrich the literature on strategic branding in the context of Islamic higher education. In contrast, the practical implications provide a blueprint for similar institutions in developing branding strategies that integrate religious values with contemporary academic standards.

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