Unggul Accreditation as a Quality-Based Marketing Strategy to Build University Brand Image

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Abstract. This study aims to examine the implementation of unggul accreditation as a brand image strategy to enhance the competitive advantage of higher education institutions. Focusing on the Early Childhood Islamic Education (PIAUD) Study Program at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, this research explores how quality-based marketing strategies—through planning, brand-building factors, and positioning—contribute to institutional reputation and student trust. Using a qualitative field research approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The results show that unggul accreditation serves not only as a quality assurance label but also as a key branding component that differentiates the program from its competitors. Key success factors include the formation of an accreditation team, strong curriculum design, excellent infrastructure, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Strategies employed include clear positioning, effective differentiation, and integrated branding efforts that leverage institutional excellence, brand association, and uniqueness.

Keywords: Brand Image, Quality Based Marketing, Unggul Accreditation, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly competitive landscape of higher education, institutional reputation and perceived academic quality have become critical factors in attracting and retaining students. One strategic approach adopted by many universities is the development of a strong brand image that signals academic excellence, innovation, and public trust. Among various mechanisms to achieve this, unggul accreditation status serves not only as a regulatory benchmark but also as a branding asset that shapes stakeholder perception and institutional positioning.

Brand image, as conceptualized by Keller (1993), refers to the perception and associations held by consumers regarding a particular entity. In the context of higher education, a positive brand image can significantly influence students' decision-making processes, satisfaction, and loyalty (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Chapleo, 2015). Accreditation, especially when labeled as "unggul" or

"excellent," functions as a symbolic representation of institutional quality and compliance with rigorous educational standards (Harvey, 2004).

Previous studies have highlighted the role of branding in the education sector. For instance, Aaker (1991) emphasizes the importance of brand equity in differentiating institutions in a saturated market. Similarly, research by Ivy (2001) and Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka (2006) points out that marketing practices in higher education must integrate quality assurance mechanisms to build credible, appealing institutional identities. However, there remains a gap in literature that explicitly connects unggul accreditation status as a quality-based marketing strategy for strengthening brand image, particularly within the Indonesian Islamic higher education landscape.

This research focuses on the PIAUD (Early Childhood Islamic Education) Study Program at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, which has been officially recognized with "Unggul" or Unggul Accreditation by LAMDIK. The program stands as a pioneering case within the university and a potential model for quality-driven academic branding. This study aims to explore how the program strategically plans, executes, and leverages unggul accreditation to enhance its brand image and market positioning.

This research seeks to address the following questions: (1) How is unggul accreditation strategically planned and implemented to build a brand image in PIAUD UIN SATU Tulungagung? (2) What key factors contribute to the formation of a unggul brand image? (3) How are quality-based marketing strategies such as positioning, differentiation, and branding employed in this context? By answering these questions, the study contributes to a better understanding of branding and quality assurance synergy in higher education marketing strategies, offering practical implications for institutional leaders and accreditation bodies seeking to enhance their competitive advantage.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how unggul accreditation functions as a strategic tool in building a higher education brand image. The research was conducted at the Early Childhood Islamic Education (PIAUD) Study Program of UIN Sayyid Ali

Rahmatullah Tulungagung, which had recently achieved "Akreditasi Unggul" (Unggul Accreditation) from LAMDIK, the independent accreditation agency for educational institutions in Indonesia. As a pioneering program within the university to receive this status, PIAUD provided a relevant and rich context for investigating how accreditation outcomes are integrated into institutional branding and quality-based marketing strategies.

The research was designed as a field study, allowing for direct engagement with institutional processes and enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamics between accreditation and branding efforts. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting those directly involved in the accreditation and promotional processes of the study program. These included program heads, faculty members, and members of the internal accreditation task force, who possessed in-depth knowledge of both the academic and administrative aspects of the accreditation journey.

To collect data, the study utilized three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted to elicit insights on strategic planning, institutional motivations, and the perceived role of unggul accreditation in shaping public trust and student interest. Observations focused on accreditation-related activities and the visual or digital branding strategies promoted by the program. Document analysis included reviewing accreditation self-assessment reports (borang), field assessment documentation, and promotional materials that were circulated via online platforms and institutional media. The triangulation of these sources ensured the credibility, dependability, and richness of the findings, consistent with the standards of qualitative inquiry.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. This process allowed for the emergence of key themes related to planning, internal quality drivers, and branding logic. Each theme was interpreted within the framework of contemporary branding and educational marketing theories, particularly those concerning customer-based brand equity and institutional reputation in the higher education sector.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of data. The study also received approval from institutional research authorities, ensuring alignment with academic and ethical research protocols.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Marketing and Marketing Management in Higher Education

Marketing in the context of higher education is no longer confined to promotional activities or student recruitment campaigns. It has evolved into a strategic function that encompasses the identification of stakeholder needs, the creation of value propositions, and the cultivation of long-term relationships with various publics, including students, parents, alumni, employers, and accreditation bodies. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), marketing is defined as "the process by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture value from customers in return." In higher education, this definition extends beyond products or services to include intangible aspects such as institutional reputation, perceived academic quality, and brand image.

Marketing management, therefore, involves the systematic planning, implementation, and evaluation of strategies that position the institution in the minds of its target audiences. This includes managing pricing policies (e.g., tuition and scholarships), program development, communication strategies, and stakeholder engagement initiatives. As Ivy (2001) and Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) argue, higher education institutions must now operate in a marketplace driven by consumer behavior, requiring them to adopt marketing strategies similar to those used in the corporate world but with ethical and mission-driven adjustments.

At UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, the PIAUD program illustrates how marketing management is integrated with institutional development. The achievement of unggul accreditation status ("Akreditasi Unggul") is not merely viewed as a regulatory compliance outcome but as a strategic marketing asset. This aligns with the perspective of Chapleo (2015), who notes that effective university marketing requires alignment between internal quality

assurance mechanisms and external brand messaging. The accreditation itself becomes part of the brand's symbolic capital—signaling excellence, credibility, and trust to prospective students and stakeholders.

Furthermore, the PIAUD program's marketing efforts reflect the shift from transactional marketing to relational and value-based marketing. The development of accreditation-focused communication, the highlighting of faculty qualifications and facilities, and the emphasis on Islamic values within the curriculum are all efforts to construct a distinctive value proposition. This resonates with the work of Ng and Forbes (2009), who argue that higher education must be understood as a service, where the student experience and institutional identity co-produce educational value.

Thus, marketing and marketing management in this case are not isolated operational tasks but embedded within the institutional culture and quality agenda. The PIAUD program at UIN SATU demonstrates how Islamic higher education institutions can reposition themselves in a competitive educational landscape by integrating marketing logic with their quality assurance frameworks and accreditation achievements.

Concept and Application in Higher Education

Brand image plays a pivotal role in shaping the reputation and attractiveness of higher education institutions. In a competitive academic environment, where students increasingly behave like consumers, institutional image becomes a crucial factor influencing their decisions (Ivy, 2001). Kevin Lane Keller (1993) defines brand image as the perceptions and associations held in consumer memory, formed by both direct experience and indirect information such as word of mouth or institutional marketing. In the context of universities, brand image comprises multiple dimensions: perceived academic quality, faculty reputation, campus facilities, employability of graduates, and even symbolic attributes such as moral values or religious affiliation.

For UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, the achievement of "Akreditasi Unggul" for the PIAUD program acts as a powerful signal of academic excellence. This unggul accreditation becomes a central component of the program's brand image, serving as evidence of quality and

accountability. From the perspective of Keller's brand equity model, this status strengthens three core components of brand image: brand associations, brand strength, and brand uniqueness.

Brand associations in the PIAUD case are built around Islamic values, child-centered pedagogy, and unggul educational quality. These associations are reinforced through consistent messaging, faculty publications, student achievements, and the presence of modern learning facilities. According to Aaker (1991), such associations contribute to consumer-based brand equity by enhancing perceived reliability and prestige. In this regard, the PIAUD program strategically frames its educational identity not only through academic rigor but also through alignment with community values and national quality standards.

Brand strength is further demonstrated through stakeholder trust—particularly from prospective students and parents—who view the unggul accreditation as a guarantee of competence. This aligns with the findings of Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007), who argue that higher education branding should emphasize assurance and trustworthiness over promotional exaggeration. In the case of PIAUD, the accreditation outcome is not simply promoted as an award but is integrated into the broader narrative of institutional development and continuous quality improvement.

Moreover, brand uniqueness is achieved by highlighting distinctive features of the PIAUD program, such as the integration of multiple intelligences theory with Islamic values, entrepreneurial skill development, and a tailored curriculum designed to prepare graduates as both educators and early childhood education leaders. These differentiators create a unique value proposition, making the program stand out from other early childhood education departments in Indonesia. This is consistent with the concept of brand differentiation as a core strategy in competitive positioning (Kapferer, 2012).

Thus, the unggul accreditation functions not only as a technical milestone but as a branding instrument that reinforces credibility, trust, and distinctiveness. The integration of brand image theory with empirical evidence from the PIAUD program illustrates how institutional identity in Islamic higher education can be strategically crafted through quality recognition and stakeholder engagement.

Strategic Planning for Unggul Brand Image in PIAUD UIN SATU Tulungagung

The process of constructing a unggul brand image in higher education is deeply rooted in strategic planning, particularly when accreditation outcomes are positioned as part of the institution's identity. At the PIAUD Study Program of UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, the achievement of Akreditasi Unggul was not incidental; it was the result of a deliberate, well-orchestrated series of institutional actions designed to meet and exceed quality standards while simultaneously enhancing public perception.

The strategic planning process began with the establishment of a dedicated accreditation team composed of faculty members, internal quality assurance personnel, and academic leaders. This team was responsible for preparing the accreditation documentation (borang), aligning institutional practices with LAMDIK's nine-criteria framework, and coordinating all supporting evidence required during the field evaluation. The team was not only technical in its role but also functioned as a communications bridge—ensuring that the accreditation mission was shared across departments and stakeholders. This internal coordination mirrors what Kotler and Fox (1995) define as internal marketing, wherein organizational members are treated as internal customers who must be informed and motivated to deliver value.

The preparation of the self-evaluation documents was strategic in itself. Rather than merely fulfilling compliance requirements, the team approached the borang as a narrative tool to project the program's excellence. Curriculum documentation was revised to emphasize innovation, community engagement, and the integration of Islamic pedagogy. Facilities were upgraded not just for accreditation visits but to meet long-term student learning needs. Faculty development programs were intensified, supporting lecturers to pursue higher degrees, publish scholarly work, and engage in public service. This holistic planning process is aligned with strategic quality management principles that integrate planning, implementation, and continuous improvement (Sahney et al., 2004).

In preparation for the field assessment, the program invested in logistical readiness as well as symbolic representation. Accreditation rooms were designed to reflect transparency, professionalism, and institutional pride. Field assessors were provided with comprehensive portfolios that not only met formal standards but also communicated the program's identity, mission, and community relevance. These practices demonstrate that quality assurance processes, when strategically planned, can simultaneously serve the goals of branding and internal development.

The strategy extended beyond the moment of accreditation. Post-accreditation efforts focused on leveraging the "unggul" status in marketing materials, social media campaigns, and stakeholder engagement forums. This reflects what Balmer and Gray (2003) refer to as strategic brand alignment, where organizational actions are synchronized with brand identity to produce long-term reputational capital.

The case of PIAUD UIN SATU Tulungagung reveals how strategic planning for accreditation is not a bureaucratic routine, but a transformative process that can drive institutional quality and shape brand perception. Through deliberate goal-setting, integrated documentation, faculty empowerment, and narrative consistency, the program positioned itself not only as an accredited entity but as a brand of excellence in early childhood Islamic education.

Factors Shaping the Unggul Brand Image of PIAUD UIN SATU Tulungagung

A strong brand image in higher education does not emerge spontaneously; it is constructed through a combination of internal capabilities, stakeholder perceptions, and consistent institutional behavior. In the case of the PIAUD Study Program at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, several interrelated factors contributed to the development of a unggul brand image that is both recognized by accreditation bodies and valued by the public.

One of the primary shaping forces is the commitment to academic excellence. The program demonstrated a continuous drive to improve the quality of teaching, curriculum design, and student outcomes. This commitment is consistent with the Total Quality Management (TQM) principle of continuous improvement (Deming, 1986), which emphasizes institutional learning and

responsiveness. Lecturers in the program were encouraged to pursue higher qualifications, engage in research, and participate in academic forums. Such investments in human capital are widely recognized as a foundation for institutional competitiveness (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Another critical factor is the quality of facilities and learning infrastructure. The program invested in well-equipped classrooms, digital learning tools, and child-oriented educational spaces that align with early childhood pedagogical needs. These investments not only support teaching and learning but also serve as tangible indicators of institutional credibility. As suggested by Arpan, Raney, and Zivnuska (2003), physical evidence—such as campus facilities—plays a substantial role in shaping students' perceptions of quality and institutional image.

The implementation of distinctive academic programs and character development initiatives also contributes to the uniqueness of the brand. PIAUD integrates the theory of multiple intelligences with Islamic values, positioning its graduates as not only competent educators but also future leaders and entrepreneurs in early childhood education. This curriculum innovation differentiates the program from others, providing what Kotler and Fox (1995) describe as a differentiated educational offering—a critical factor in attracting and retaining students in a competitive market.

Furthermore, the program's emphasis on student development and alumni success reinforces its reputation. By actively preparing students for professional certifications, internships, and community service, the program builds trust and loyalty among its stakeholders. Positive word-of-mouth from alumni and local education stakeholders amplifies brand strength and helps sustain a positive image. In line with the model proposed by Helgesen and Nesset (2007), student satisfaction and perceived career value are essential predictors of institutional loyalty and brand advocacy in higher education.

The desire to achieve and maintain "Akreditasi Unggul" status further acted as a catalytic force driving institutional alignment and strategic focus. Accreditation was not treated as a one-time evaluative event, but as an ongoing institutional philosophy embedded in daily academic and administrative operations. The PIAUD program's leadership cultivated a culture of quality awareness, where every stakeholder—from lecturers and students to administrative staff—

understood their role in upholding the standards required by the accreditation body. This reflects Harvey and Knight's (1996) notion of transformational quality, where quality is embedded in institutional ethos and becomes a shared responsibility rather than a top-down mandate.

In addition, institutional communication strategies played an important role in reinforcing the unggul brand image. The program leveraged various platforms—including official websites, social media channels, brochures, and local community networks—to project its achievements and distinctive identity. Messaging emphasized the program's excellence, accreditation status, student achievements, and religious values. Consistent with the concept of integrated marketing communications (Schultz & Kitchen, 2000), this alignment between internal performance and external messaging ensured that stakeholder perceptions were shaped by coherent and credible narratives.

Taken together, these factors formed a dynamic ecosystem in which the unggul brand image of PIAUD was not merely declared but demonstrably built. The integration of academic excellence, quality infrastructure, curriculum innovation, alumni success, and strategic communication reflects a multidimensional branding process rooted in substance rather than image alone. This case reaffirms that in the domain of higher education—especially within faith-based institutions—brand image is not a cosmetic feature but a strategic reflection of institutional integrity, capacity, and societal relevance.

Quality-Based Marketing Strategies: Positioning, Differentiation, and Branding

The PIAUD Study Program at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung exemplifies how quality-based marketing strategies can be effectively employed to reinforce institutional brand image and gain a competitive edge in the higher education landscape. Central to this effort are three interconnected strategies: positioning, differentiation, and branding, each rooted in both marketing theory and practical institutional behavior.

Positioning refers to how an institution defines its identity and value in the minds of its target audience. At PIAUD, positioning was intentionally built around its status as a unggul-accredited program, its integration of Islamic values, and its focus on early childhood pedagogy. The program positioned itself as a pioneer in producing holistic educators who not only master child

development but also uphold religious and moral values. According to Ries and Trout (2001), effective positioning requires that institutions identify a unique space in the marketplace and consistently reinforce it through communication and performance. In this case, the unggul accreditation served as a signal of academic and moral credibility, shaping perceptions among prospective students and stakeholders.

Differentiation further strengthened the brand by emphasizing what makes the PIAUD program distinct. This includes its curriculum design based on the theory of multiple intelligences, integration of entrepreneurship training for future educators, and use of community-based learning models. Unlike generic early childhood education programs, PIAUD tailored its academic offerings to meet the developmental, spiritual, and vocational needs of its students. Differentiation, as Kotler and Armstrong (2018) emphasize, must be based on attributes that are meaningful, distinctive, and sustainable. By offering a hybrid model of pedagogy and Islamic character formation, PIAUD distinguished itself in both academic and spiritual domains.

Branding, as the culminating strategy, involved the systematic construction and communication of the program's identity. The PIAUD program developed a consistent visual and narrative identity through digital media, community engagement, and alumni stories. This branding effort was not limited to superficial slogans or logos; it was grounded in the real performance and outcomes of the program. The branding strategy drew from the concept of institutional branding, which Chapleo (2005) describes as the alignment of organizational behavior with stakeholder expectations and values. By aligning its unggul accreditation, academic delivery, and community service with its branding message, the program built trust and emotional resonance with its audiences.

Moreover, digital platforms played a key role in amplifying these strategies. The program actively used social media, institutional websites, and online promotional content to communicate its vision, achievements, and accreditation status. This digital engagement supported visibility, transparency, and relationship-building—essential elements in brand development in the era of higher education consumerism (Belanger et al., 2002).

In summary, the integration of positioning, differentiation, and branding within a quality-based framework allowed the PIAUD program not only to comply with accreditation standards but also to strategically elevate its institutional image. These strategies were not isolated marketing tactics but part of a coherent, mission-driven effort to communicate excellence, build trust, and foster long-term loyalty among stakeholders. The PIAUD case provides a model for how faith-based institutions can engage in meaningful marketing without compromising academic and ethical integrity.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that unggul accreditation can serve as a strategic instrument for building a strong and sustainable brand image in Islamic higher education institutions. Drawing upon the case of the PIAUD Study Program at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, it becomes evident that accreditation, when approached as part of a holistic quality management system, offers more than mere compliance—it becomes a catalyst for institutional identity, public trust, and competitive advantage.

The findings reveal that the success of the PIAUD program in attaining and leveraging "Akreditasi Unggul" was the result of strategic planning, stakeholder commitment, and institutional coherence. Critical factors such as academic excellence, qualified faculty, modern learning facilities, and curriculum distinctiveness collectively shaped a brand image recognized by both accreditation bodies and the public. The unggul brand image was further amplified through quality-based marketing strategies, namely positioning the program as a moral and academic leader, differentiating through unique pedagogical offerings, and branding through consistent and value-driven narratives.

These strategies align with global theories of brand equity, educational marketing, and quality assurance, illustrating that Islamic higher education institutions are capable of integrating modern branding practices without compromising their religious or educational values. The PIAUD case, therefore, provides a replicable model for other study programs and institutions seeking to elevate their institutional image through authentic, quality-driven initiatives.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing discourse on branding in higher education by emphasizing the importance of substance over image, where accreditation is not simply a label, but a living representation of institutional excellence and stakeholder-centered innovation.

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