

Human Capital and Institutional Sustainability in Regional Development: Brand Equity and Communication Strategies for Sustainable Higher Education Recruitment

Umar*, Ria Amelinda, and Shofi Yogi Fajriyah
Universitas Islam Negeri Palopo, 91914, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to analyze the effect of Brand Equity—consisting of Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Relevance, and Promotional Effectiveness on prospective students’ enrollment intention in selecting a study program.

Design/methodology/approach – This research employs a mixed-method approach with data analysis techniques including multiple regression analysis, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and interview analysis.

Finding/Results The findings show that brand image and promotional effectiveness are the main drivers of prospective students’ enrollment decisions. Effective recruitment requires integrated digital and offline promotion, program-level branding, student and alumni involvement, authentic storytelling, school partnerships, and interactive digital communication to strengthen public trust and sustain student recruitment.

Originality/Value – This study integrates quantitative brand equity analysis with qualitative communication strategies to develop sustainable student recruitment strategies in a regional Islamic higher education context.

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*Corresponding Author at:

Universitas Islam Negeri Palopo, Jalan Agatis, Balandai, Kota Palopo, 91914, Indonesia.

E-mail address: umar@uinpalopo.ac.id*, riaamelinda@uinpalopo.ac.id, 2301040030@uinpalopo.ac.id

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1. Introduction

Competition among higher education institutions in Indonesia has become increasingly intense in line with the growing public demand for tertiary education and the rising number of institutions offering diverse study programs. Both public and private universities are striving to build their reputation and attractiveness by improving academic quality, strengthening facilities, and utilizing effective communication strategies to attract prospective new students. This condition compels every institution to possess a clear competitive advantage, particularly in developing a strong brand image to survive and remain in demand amid the increasingly tight national competition (Kajian et al., 2020). Beyond their role as providers of educational services, higher education institutions also play an important role in developing human capital and supporting regional development. Through the provision of knowledge, skills, and professional competencies, universities contribute to the quality of human resources and the socioeconomic progress of their surrounding regions. Therefore, the ability of higher education institutions to attract and retain students is not only relevant to institutional competitiveness but also to the sustainability of human capital development at the regional level.

The competition is also strongly evident within the scope of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), which today are not only competing among themselves but also with general universities that offer religious studies programs as well as alternative non-religious programs. The modernization and institutional transformation of PTKIN into State Islamic Universities (UIN) have increased public expectations regarding academic quality, services, and graduate outcomes. PTKIN are required to embrace a market-driven education orientation, strengthen their positioning, and optimize branding and communication strategies to maintain public trust and increase annual student enrollment (Ptin et al., 2025). At the regional level, new student recruitment competition is also experienced by the State Islamic University of Palopo, operating in the Luwu Raya area. As the only state university in the region, UIN Palopo should possess strategic competitive advantages compared to other higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the presence of various private universities and the increasingly open access to universities in major cities such as Makassar have provided prospective students with broader study alternatives. This situation requires UIN Palopo to reinforce its differentiation strategy, brand recognition, and educational marketing communication to remain the primary choice among prospective students in Luwu Raya. As a regional higher education institution, UIN Palopo also has an important role in supporting the development of human capital in Luwu Raya. Its capacity to attract prospective students and maintain sustainable enrollment is therefore closely related to its ability to continuously produce qualified graduates who can contribute to the social and economic development of the region. In this context, sustainable student recruitment represents not merely an institutional marketing objective but also an important element of institutional sustainability and the continuity of regional human capital development.

In recent years, UIN Palopo has faced a significant decline in the number of newly enrolled students. This phenomenon indicates potential issues concerning public perception of the institution, the effectiveness of communication strategies, and the attractiveness of its study programs. Such a decline may affect the institution's operational stability, academic performance, and long-term competitiveness, and therefore requires a comprehensive evaluation of the factors influencing students' intentions to choose UIN Palopo. From an institutional sustainability perspective, persistent declines in student enrollment may have broader implications for the long-term capacity of higher education institutions to maintain academic programs, utilize institutional resources, and fulfill their role in producing human capital. For regional universities such as UIN Palopo, maintaining sustainable student recruitment is particularly important because the institution serves as part of the regional education ecosystem and contributes to the availability of skilled human resources. Accordingly, understanding the factors that influence prospective students' enrollment intentions is essential for strengthening institutional sustainability and supporting the university's contribution to regional development.

The highest decline in student enrollment occurred in four study programs: Sociology of Religion, Sharia Economic Law, Mathematics Education, and Early Childhood Islamic Education. This situation demonstrates that academic marketing strategies and the communication of study program advantages have not been optimal. Low interest in these programs may be influenced by perceptions of future career relevance, limited public understanding of graduate profiles, and insufficient exposure to curriculum strengths and career prospects. This condition requires an in-depth analysis to identify underlying causes and propose alternative improvement strategies. Brand Awareness is an essential factor influencing prospective students' decision to choose a university. If the existence and advantages of UIN Palopo and its study programs are not widely recognized, its chance of being considered a primary option becomes increasingly limited. Low brand awareness may lead prospective students to choose more popular institutions with stronger public exposure. Therefore, enhancing Brand Awareness is a strategic necessity to ensure greater public recognition and understanding of the existence and advantages of UIN Palopo (Yaqin & Aini, 2025).

Beyond recognition, universities must also possess a positive Brand Image in the eyes of the public. Perceptions of academic quality, facilities, student achievements, lecturers, and alumni profoundly affect prospective students' trust. When the perceived image is not strong, or even negative, intention to enroll declines. A strong Brand Image builds a sense of reputable standing and enhances UIN Palopo's attractiveness as a leading educational institution in the Luwu Raya region (Ningsih, 2019). Perceived Relevance refers to the extent to which the offered study programs are considered aligned with future needs and career opportunities. When prospective students perceive that programs at UIN Palopo lack strong relevance or do not guarantee promising job prospects, they are likely to seek alternatives

elsewhere. Conversely, high relevance strengthens the belief that studying at UIN Palopo is a beneficial investment for their future (Juhaidi et al., 2023).

Ineffective promotional efforts are also among the causes of low student interest. In the digital era, communication strategies must be creative, targeted, and data-driven to reach the intended audience effectively. If UIN Palopo's promotional activities are not optimal, lack variation, or fail to utilize media platforms suitable for the current generation of prospective students, its institutional messages will not be delivered effectively. Promotional effectiveness thus becomes an essential aspect of increasing Enrollment Intention (Kango et al., 2021). In this regard, brand equity and communication strategies can be viewed as important institutional resources for achieving sustainable student recruitment. Effective communication not only increases institutional visibility but also communicates the quality, relevance, and value of educational programs to prospective students and other stakeholders. When consistently developed, these strategies may strengthen public trust, support sustainable enrollment, and enhance the institutional capacity of regional universities to contribute to human capital development and regional development.

To date, research on declining enrollment interest in the PTKIN context especially in the eastern region of Indonesia remains limited. Most previous studies have focused solely on a single variable, such as brand image or service quality, and have not thoroughly examined the simultaneous influence of the four components of brand equity on program selection intention combined with institutional communication strategies. This condition indicates a research gap that requires deeper exploration (Sudhana et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2020; Yaping et al., 2023). To date, research on declining enrollment interest in the PTKIN context especially in the eastern region of Indonesia—remains limited. Most previous studies have focused solely on a single variable, such as brand image or service quality, and have not thoroughly examined the simultaneous influence of the four components of brand equity on program selection intention combined with institutional communication strategies. This condition indicates a research gap that requires deeper exploration (Sudhana et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2020; Yaping et al., 2023). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to understanding sustainable student recruitment as part of institutional sustainability and its broader implications for the role of regional higher education institutions in human capital and regional development.

The novelty of this study lies in the integration of quantitative analysis regarding the influence of the four brand-equity variables on the intention to choose study programs with a qualitative approach through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews to analyze communication strategies employed by UIN Palopo in recruiting new students. This mixed-method approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of enrollment decline and the formulation of solution-based and empirically grounded strategies. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of quantitative analysis regarding the influence of the four brand-equity variables on the intention to choose study programs with a qualitative approach through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews to analyze communication

strategies employed by UIN Palopo in recruiting new students. This mixed-method approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of enrollment decline and the formulation of solution-based and empirically grounded strategies. The study further positions sustainable student recruitment as an important mechanism for strengthening institutional sustainability and supporting the contribution of regional higher education institutions to human capital and regional development.

This study is important as a foundation for evaluating and formulating more effective educational marketing communication strategies for UIN Palopo. The findings are expected to serve as recommendations for policymakers in strengthening the attractiveness of study programs, enhancing brand equity, and increasing the number of new students in the future. Therefore, this research has both practical and academic contributions to the development of educational marketing within the PTKIN environment

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Institutional Theory, Human Capital, and Regional Development

Institutional Theory explains how organizations respond to pressures from their institutional environment by adapting their strategies and practices to gain legitimacy, maintain stakeholder trust, and ensure long-term survival (Scott, 2014). In the context of higher education, universities operate in an increasingly competitive environment where institutional legitimacy, reputation, and public recognition are important for attracting prospective students and maintaining organizational sustainability. Higher education institutions also play a strategic role in human capital development by providing knowledge, skills, and competencies that contribute to regional economic and social progress (Becker, 1964). As producers of skilled human resources, universities contribute to local labor markets, innovation, productivity, and regional competitiveness. Therefore, sustainable student recruitment is important not only for institutional continuity but also for maintaining the contribution of regional universities to human capital development and regional development.

2.2 Brand Equity and Enrollment Intention

Brand equity refers to the value associated with a brand that can influence how stakeholders recognize, evaluate, and respond to an organization (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). In higher education, brand equity is important because prospective students often face uncertainty when evaluating alternative universities and study programs. A strong institutional brand can differentiate a university from competitors, strengthen legitimacy, and increase confidence in the quality and value of its educational offerings (Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). In this study, brand equity is represented by Brand Awareness, Brand Image, and Perceived Relevance, while Promotional Effectiveness reflects the communication mechanism through which institutional value is conveyed to prospective students.

2.3 Brand Awareness and Enrollment Intention

Brand Awareness refers to the ability of prospective students to recognize and recall a university or study program (Aaker, 1991). From an institutional perspective, higher brand awareness can increase institutional visibility and the likelihood that a university becomes part of prospective students' consideration sets. Familiarity with an institution may also

reduce uncertainty when students evaluate alternative higher education options. Therefore, higher brand awareness is expected to increase prospective students' intention to enroll.

H1 : Brand Awareness has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

2.4 Brand Image and Enrollment Intention

Brand Image reflects the perceptions and associations that prospective students hold toward a university or study program, including academic quality, reputation, facilities, graduate achievements, and career prospects (Keller, 1993). A positive institutional image can strengthen legitimacy and trust, which are important in prospective students' evaluation of alternative institutions. Previous research has also demonstrated that university image is an important factor influencing students' enrollment intentions and decisions (Wilkins & Huisman, 2015; Li et al., 2025). Therefore, a stronger Brand Image is expected to increase prospective students' intention to enroll.

H2 :Brand Image has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

2.5 Perceived Relevance and Enrollment Intention

Perceived Relevance refers to the extent to which prospective students perceive a study program as aligned with their interests, future career opportunities, and labor market needs. From an institutional perspective, communicating the relevance of academic programs can strengthen the perceived value and legitimacy of a university among prospective students. Programs perceived as relevant to future employment and professional development are more likely to be considered attractive educational choices. Therefore, higher Perceived Relevance is expected to strengthen prospective students' Enrollment Intention.

H3: Perceived Relevance has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

2.6 Promotional Effectiveness and Enrollment Intention

Promotional Effectiveness refers to the extent to which institutional communication successfully delivers relevant, credible, and persuasive information to prospective students. Effective promotion can increase institutional visibility, communicate academic strengths, reduce uncertainty, and strengthen perceptions of institutional credibility. In the higher education context, strategic communication and social media engagement can influence institutional image, trust, and prospective students' enrollment decisions (Li et al., 2025). From the perspective of Institutional Theory, effective communication can also function as a mechanism through which universities demonstrate legitimacy and respond to stakeholder expectations (Scott, 2014). Therefore, higher Promotional Effectiveness is expected to increase prospective students' Enrollment Intention.

H4: Promotional Effectiveness has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

2.7 Sustainable Student Recruitment and Institutional Sustainability

Institutional sustainability refers to the capacity of higher education institutions to maintain their academic, organizational, and social functions over the long term. Sustainable student recruitment is an important component of institutional sustainability because continuous student enrollment enables universities to maintain academic programs, utilize institutional resources, and sustain their role in human capital development. From the perspective of Institutional Theory, universities need to continuously adapt to competitive pressures and changing stakeholder expectations to maintain legitimacy and organizational survival (Scott, 2014). In this context, brand equity and effective communication strategies can serve as institutional mechanisms for strengthening public trust, differentiating universities from competitors, and sustaining student recruitment. Thus, sustainable recruitment can

contribute to the long-term institutional sustainability of regional universities and their continued contribution to human capital and regional development.\

2.8 Hypothesis Development and Research Framework

Based on Institutional Theory, this study argues that higher education institutions need to respond to competitive and institutional pressures by strengthening their legitimacy and attractiveness through brand equity and effective communication. Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Relevance, and Promotional Effectiveness are therefore expected to influence prospective students' Enrollment Intention. Sustainable student recruitment, in turn, represents an important mechanism for maintaining institutional sustainability and supporting the contribution of regional universities to human capital and regional development.

Accordingly, the hypotheses proposed in this study are:

H1: Brand Awareness has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

H2: Brand Image has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

H3: Perceived Relevance has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

H4: Promotional Effectiveness has a positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The quantitative approach consisted of regression analysis to measure the influence of Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Relevance, and Promotional Effectiveness on Prospective Students' Intention to Choose Study Programs, both partially and simultaneously. In addition, the qualitative approach was conducted through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews to analyze effective communication strategies for recruiting new students at UIN Palopo.

The population for the quantitative data comprised 12th-grade students from Senior High Schools (SMA), Vocational High Schools (SMK), Islamic Senior High Schools (MA), and Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren) across the Luwu Raya region (Palopo City, Luwu Regency, North Luwu Regency, and East Luwu Regency). The sample size was determined using the Lemeshow sampling technique, resulting in 96 respondents.

Furthermore, the qualitative informants included two communication experts to explore insights related to efficient communication strategies in recruiting new students at UIN Palopo, and 15 FGD participants consisting of Heads of Study Programs, students, Public Relations officers, and the New Student Admission Team of UIN Palopo.

This study applied three data collection techniques. First, questionnaires were distributed to obtain quantitative data. Second, interviews were conducted with two communication experts to acquire qualitative data. Third, FGDs were carried out to enrich and validate the qualitative findings related to effective communication strategies for new student recruitment at UIN Palopo.

The quantitative data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The stages included the Validity Test, Reliability Test, Classical Assumption Tests (Normality Test, Multicollinearity Test, and Heteroscedasticity Test), Regression Equation Test, Hypothesis

Tests (Partial and Simultaneous Tests), and the Determination Test (R-Square). Subsequently, qualitative data obtained from interviews and FGDs were analyzed and concluded to generate themes that support the formulation of communication strategies.

The quantitative analysis employs a multiple linear regression model to examine the factors influencing prospective students' Enrollment Intention. The theoretical model is specified as:

$$EIP_i = f(BA_i, BI_i, PR_i, PE_i)$$

The empirical model used to examine the determinants of prospective students' Enrollment Intention is specified as follows:

$$EIP_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 BA_i + \beta_2 BI_i + \beta_3 PR_i + \beta_4 PE_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where EIP: Enrollment Intention of prospective student; BA is Brand Awareness; BI is Brand Image; PR is Perceived Relevance; PE is Promotional Effectiveness.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

4.1.1 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Table 1. Results of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-statistic	p-value
Constant	0.6458	0.3264	1.9782	0.0509
X1 – Brand Awareness	0.0736	0.0720	1.0221	0.3094
X2 – Brand Image	0.4040	0.0781	5.1722	0.000001
X3 – Perceived Relevance	0.0971	0.0771	1.2585	0.2114
X4 – Promotional Effectiveness	0.2173	0.0815	2.6676	0.0090

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Based on the regression coefficient results, the following equation is obtained

$$Y = 0.6458 + 0.0736X_1 + 0.4040X_2 + 0.0971X_3 + 0.2173X_4$$

The results show that Brand Image (X2) has the strongest positive and significant effect on Enrollment Intention ($\beta = 0.4040$; $p < 0.001$), followed by Promotional Effectiveness (X4) ($\beta = 0.2173$; $p = 0.0090$). Meanwhile, Brand Awareness (X1) ($p = 0.3094$) and Perceived Relevance (X3) ($p = 0.2114$) have positive but statistically insignificant effects. Thus, prospective students' enrollment intentions are more strongly influenced by the institution's brand image and promotional effectiveness than by brand awareness or perceived relevance.

4.1.2 Simultaneous test

Table 2. F-Test

Statistic	Value
F-hitung	24.0631
p-value (Sig.)	0.0000000000001343
df Regression	4
df Residual	95
Keterangan	Signifikan pada $\alpha = 0.05$

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Based on the F-test results, the calculated F-value is 24.0631 with a p-value of 0.0000 (< 0.05). This indicates that Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Relevance, and Promotional Effectiveness simultaneously have a significant effect on Enrollment Intention. Thus, the regression model is statistically significant and appropriate for explaining variations in students' enrollment intention. The coefficient of determination (R^2) test was subsequently conducted to assess the extent to which the four independent variables collectively explain variations in Enrollment Intention. The results are presented in the following table.

4.1.3 Determination Test (R^2)

Table 3. Determination Test (R^2)

Statistic	Value
R-squared	0.5140
Adjusted R-squared	0.4927

Source: Processed Data, 2026

The results of the determination test show that the R-squared value is 0.5140, meaning that the regression model is able to explain 51.40% of the variation in Enrollment Intention. Thus, more than half of students' decisions in choosing a study program can be explained by Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Relevance, and Promotional Effectiveness. Meanwhile, the remaining 48.60% is explained by other factors outside the model, such as family influence, tuition fees, personal motivation, social environment, location, or the general reputation of the institution.

4.1.4 Qualitative Analysis

Focus Group Discussions Analysis

Based on the results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with students from four Study Programs that experienced the most significant decline in applicants namely Religious Sociology, Islamic Economic Law (HES), Mathematics Education, and Early Childhood Islamic Education (PIAUD) a number of solutions were identified as effective in increasing prospective students' interest. As parties directly involved in academic activities and the campus social environment, students have a realistic understanding of the public communication needs that align with the characteristics of the younger generation. In addition, students also play a strategic role as informal influencers through friendship networks, social media, and real-life experiences they share with prospective students at schools. Therefore, students' perspectives form an important basis for formulating experience-based promotional approaches that are more authentic, relevant, and highly appealing. The analysis of students' solutions to increase new student enrollment can be seen in the following table.

Tabel 4. The Analysis Results of Solutions from the Head of the Study Program

Main Problems Identified	Root Causes	Strategic Solutions Proposed by Program Heads	Expected Impact / Outcomes
Declining number of new students in	Lack of specific promotion	Decentralization of promotion to the study	Improvement of promotion

four study programs	strategies at the program level	program level by forming a Study Program Promotion Team	effectiveness and number of applicants per study program
Low Study Program Brand Awareness	Limited publication, promotional events, and collaboration with schools	Routine promotion through school visits, open campus, and FGD with school counselors	Increase in Study Program recognition in target schools
Brand Image not yet strong in the community	Study Program strengths have not been widely communicated	Rebranding and preparation of Study Program excellence narrative based on achievements, facilities, curriculum, and alumni	Increase in public positive perception and academic reputation
Low community understanding of career prospects	Career opportunity information is not clearly conveyed	Publication of successful alumni videos, career prospects, and industry collaboration	Increased Perceived Relevance for prospective students
Limited creative promotional media	Promotion still general and less visual	Optimization of creative digital content on TikTok and Instagram based on program activities	Expanded digital audience reach and higher Gen Z engagement
Minimal public academic activities in the study program	Publication agenda not scheduled	Routine academic events such as competitions, workshops, and training in schools	Study programs recognized through direct experience (experiential marketing)
Unintegrated promotional coordination	Promotion concentrated only at university level	Collaboration between Public Relations – Admission – Study Program with clear task division	Integrated and effective promotion system
Weak school networking	No formal cooperation	MoU with schools and educational institutions as promotion partners	Wider and more stable student recruitment channels

Source: FGD Analysis, 2026

Tabel 5. Analysis of Student Solutions Based on FGD Results

Study Program	Problems Perceived by Students	Strategic Solutions from Students	Recommended Implementation	Expected Impact
Early Childhood	Public perception that	Rebranding by highlighting	Publication of academic activities,	Improved Brand Image

Islamic Education (PIAUD)	PIAUD is only about playing and singing; limited understanding of career prospects	academic competence and professionalism in PAUD teacher education	workshops, microteaching in schools, and alumni video testimonials	and public trust
Islamic Sociology	Low understanding of career prospects and field relevance	Showcasing successful alumni and involvement in social-religious issues	Seminars, collaborative events, and media coverage	Improved Perceived Relevance and awareness
Sharia Economic Law (HES)	Competition with other law majors and lack of career pathway information	Strengthening information on career prospects in legal and halal industry sectors	Alumni podcasts, professional videos, and collaboration with Islamic financial institutions	Clear career positioning
Mathematics Education	Stereotype that mathematics is difficult and unattractive	Showcasing creative learning methods and attractive academic activities	School math competitions, free tutoring, educational TikTok content	Removing negative stigma and increasing attractiveness
All Study Programs	Promotion still passive and less creative	Optimization of student roles as student ambassadors	Formation of Student Promotion Team and experiential content	Significant increase in awareness and interest

Source: FGD analysis, 2025

After obtaining perspectives from the Heads of Study Programs and students, the next step in the qualitative analysis of this research is to explore the viewpoints of the Public Relations (HUMAS) unit at UIN Palopo, which plays a crucial role in managing institutional communication, information dissemination, and campus branding strategies. HUMAS serves as the frontline in building the university's image, distributing official information, and connecting UIN Palopo with the wider community through various communication media, both offline and digital. Therefore, HUMAS's perspectives provide highly relevant insights for understanding how the campus's promotional and communication strategies have been implemented and the extent of their effectiveness in increasing prospective students' interest. The HUMAS perspective is particularly important to analyze because this unit is the primary controller of new student admission (PMB) promotion, social media management, academic activity publications, and coordination of campus visual content. HUMAS is also the party most aware of the dynamics of promotional competition among universities and the challenges of reaching an increasingly selective and digitally oriented young audience. Consequently, HUMAS's input can help identify the strengths and weaknesses of current

communication strategies and provide guidance for improving the campus promotion system to build a stronger brand and enhance prospective students' enrollment intention. The following presents a summary of the FGD results from the perspective of UIN Palopo's HUMAS. The HUMAS perspective based on the FGD activities is as follows.

Tabel 6. Strategic Solutions for Public Relations of UIN Palopo

Main Problems	Root Causes	Strategic Solutions from Public Relations	Suggested Operational Implementation	Expected Impact
Promotion coverage not broad and consistent	Limited resources and workload	Strengthening promotion team collaboration Public Relations– Admission–Study Program	Formation of <i>Media and Promotion Task Force</i> including lecturers/students	Improved coordination effectiveness and audience reach
Digital promotion not optimal for Gen Z	Content lacks creativity and storytelling	Optimization of Instagram, TikTok, and short video content	Routine production of campaigns, BTS, and alumni testimonials	Significant increase in engagement and brand awareness
Admission website not informative and not a central hub	Less attractive layout	Website redesign and integration of information services	Virtual campus tour, interactive FAQ, and admission chatbot	Increased trust and comfort for prospective students
Minimal collaboration with schools & communities	No formal MoU or routine program	<i>School Partnership & Community Networking Program</i>	Annual agenda: roadshow, counselor workshops, school competitions	More stable and sustainable recruitment channel
Promotion not experiential	Lack of direct contact activities	<i>Open Campus Day / Campus Visit / Academic Festival</i>	Inviting schools to campus experience	Increased positive perception and interest to apply
Alumni not used as brand assets	No structured alumni database	<i>Alumni Ambassador Program</i>	Collaboration on alumni career profile video content	Strengthened Brand Image & <i>Perceived Relevance</i>
Promotion still informative, not persuasive	Lack of emotional & narrative approach	Storytelling-based strategy	Journey stories of students and alumni	Positive public image and emotional engagement
Promotion reactive & not calendar-based	No promotional roadmap	Integrated annual promotional calendar	School socialization schedule, digital content, public	Planned, targeted, and measurable

development	events	promotion
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Source: FGD analysis, 2026

After obtaining insights from the perspectives of the Heads of Study Programs, students, and HUMAS, the next stage in the qualitative analysis of this research is to explore the viewpoints of the New Student Admission (PMB) Team, as they are directly involved in implementing recruitment strategies and managing the new student selection system at UIN Palopo. The PMB Team holds a strategic position because they serve as the operational executors of promotion activities, admissions, and the re-enrollment process for new students. Therefore, the PMB Team's perspectives provide important information regarding the effectiveness of the current recruitment system, technical and field challenges, as well as opportunities to develop more optimal strategies to increase the number of applicants.

The PMB Team's perspective is crucial to analyze because this unit is the primary executor of field promotion activities through school visits, socialization events, coordination of the PMB committee, and provision of information services for prospective students. The PMB Team also possesses up-to-date knowledge of the competition dynamics among universities, student responses to promotional efforts, and trends in new student interest patterns, both in the context of state Islamic higher education institutions (PTKIN) and private universities (PTS) in the Luwu Raya region. By exploring the PMB Team's viewpoints, this study can map managerial and operational constraints that have historically hindered increases in applicant numbers and formulate strategies based on real field needs. The following presents a summary of the FGD results from the perspective of UIN Palopo's PMB Team.

Tabel 7. Analysis of UIN Palopo PMB Team Solutions Based on FGD Results

Main Problems	Root Causes	Strategic Solutions from Admission Team	Recommended Technical Implementation	Expected Impact
Decline in student applicants	Tight competition between PTKIN and private universities in the region	Strengthening hybrid (offline online) promotion strategies	School socialization and creative digital content	Increased promotion reach and applicant interest
School outreach unscheduled and passive	No planned promotion calendar	Development of Annual Promotional Roadmap	Roadshow schedule, open campus, collaborative events	More measurable, effective, and systematic promotion
Minimal formal cooperation with schools	No strategic MoU	<i>School Partnership & Networking Program</i>	MoU with schools and counselor communities	Stable and sustainable recruitment channels
Promotion	Low Study	Decentralization	Formation of	More specific

centralized at university level	Program involvement	to Study Program level	Study Program Admission Team	and communicative program information
Poor alumni branding utilization	Poorly managed alumni database	Alumni Engagement for Marketing	Alumni database & testimonial campaigns	Increased trust and branding sustainability
Digital promotion not optimal	Informative-only content, not persuasive	Transformation to storytelling & visual education	Alumni podcasts, professional videos, TikTok education	Significant increase in digital engagement
Conversion from registrants to re-registration low	Weak follow-up system	CRM-based Follow-Up Management System	WA reminders and academic & scholarship service	Increased conversion rate
Admission information not centralized & outdated	Less interactive website	Strengthening admission website as service center	Virtual tour & digital FAQ	Professional impression & public trust

Source: FGD analysis, 2026

Based on the results of interviews with experts, the phenomenon of declining new student enrollment is a national issue affecting not only state Islamic universities (PTKIN) but also many higher education institutions across Indonesia. This decline is influenced by several external factors, such as increasingly fierce competition among universities, particularly from private institutions that are more aggressive in promotion and offer greater flexibility. In addition, the shift in mindset among young people, who increasingly prefer to work quickly and earn income rather than continue higher education, also worsens interest in pursuing college. Family economic conditions are also a significant variable influencing the decision to continue studying.

The main factors causing decreased interest among prospective students include ineffective and less innovative promotional strategies that do not fully align with Generation Z's characteristics. Intense competition with other public and private universities that are more creative in recruitment also plays a role. Additionally, parental influence has become stronger in determining campus choice, so promotional strategies need to target dual audiences, namely students and parents. Limited public education regarding graduates' career prospects makes the relevance of higher education appear weaker to prospective students.

For effective communication strategies, experts emphasize the importance of a mix strategy between offline and online approaches. Strengthening direct outreach to schools remains the primary strategy to build emotional closeness and trust. On the digital side, creative

storytelling-based content has proven effective in attracting Generation Z's attention, particularly through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Universities are also advised to promote advantages based on tangible benefits to the community, rather than merely academic slogans.

Institutional branding is a key factor in building reputation and public trust, which directly influences prospective students' decisions. Branding must be developed consistently, sustainably, and based on real achievements of students and alumni. A strong brand serves as a differentiator in increasingly tight competition. Accordingly, promotional content for Generation Z should be concise, visual, emotional, and relevant to their values and needs. Content can be presented naturally, flow smoothly, and even incorporate humor or memes, involving students and young lecturers as the "face of promotion."

In terms of promotion, balancing digital and conventional methods is essential. Digital marketing is effective, but in areas with limited internet access, conventional promotion remains important, particularly to reach parents. According to experts, the ideal ratio in a modern campaign strategy is 70% digital and 30% offline. Furthermore, the role of alumni in promotion is still underutilized and should become a priority. Testimonials from successful alumni and collaborative content highlighting alumni professions can enhance perceptions of institutional quality while strengthening public appeal.

Best practices from other universities indicate that intensive school roadshows, open campus events, and the activation of community service (KKN) programs as field promotion are more effective than merely distributing textual information. Internal collaboration is also important, with promotion based on Study Programs and a clear, organized working structure between HUMAS – PMB – Prodi.

Looking toward 2026, strategic recommendations include focusing on improving the quality of students and graduates to create natural brand trust, allocating specific budgets for TikTok ads and targeted digital campaigns, and developing creative, relevant, and professional promotional strategies. These strategies are expected to increase the number of applicants and strengthen the institution's competitiveness sustainably. Based on these interviews, the following presents the analysis of strategic solutions from experts in efforts to increase new student enrollment at UIN Palopo, as shown in the following table.

Tabel 8. Analysis of Expert Strategic Solutions in Increasing New Students

Main Problems	Expert Analysis	Recommended Strategic Solutions	Recommended Technical Implementation	Expected Impact
Decline in new students	National trend due to campus competition & youth preference shifts	Strengthening competitive & adaptive promotion strategies	Benchmarking and target audience segmentation	Applicant growth and increased competitiveness
Ineffective	Informative	Hybrid	Intensive	Wider reach and

promotion strategies	only, not persuasive	marketing (offline & online)	roadshows and creative digital content	more influential promotion
Weak campus brand awareness	Lack of prestige-based image building	Institutional branding reinforcement	Publishing achievements of students and alumni	Increased public trust
Underutilized alumni	Alumni not used as brand assets	Alumni Ambassador Campaign	Alumni profile & profession testimonial videos	Stronger Brand Image & trust
Digital promotion suboptimal	Content not attractive to Gen Z	Digital storytelling and video campaigns	Reels, TikTok, talkshow	Increased engagement & interest
Career prospect information unclear	Low perceived relevance	Focus on functional Study Program benefits	Market-data-based profession campaign	Increased Perceived Relevance
Poor internal promotion coordination	Unplanned and reactive promotion	Integrated annual promotion calendar	Year-round promotional roadmap	Higher efficiency and consistency

Source: FGD analysis, 2026

4.2 Discussion

The t-test is used to determine the partial effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable, namely Enrollment Intention. Through this test, it can be identified whether each variable Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Relevance, and Promotional Effectiveness has a statistically significant contribution to changes in the dependent variable. The t-test also helps determine which variables truly exert a meaningful influence within the regression model. Based on Table 1 above, Brand Image (X2) has a positive and significant effect on enrollment intention. This indicates that the better the image of the study program, the higher the prospective students' interest in choosing it. Promotional Effectiveness (X4) also has a significant influence, meaning that effective promotion can increase students' intention to enroll in the study program. In contrast, Brand Awareness (X1) and Perceived Relevance (X3) are not statistically significant. This implies that increasing brand awareness or perceived relevance has not yet been strong enough to influence prospective students' decision-making.

The results of the t-test indicate that only the variables Brand Image (X2) and Promotional Effectiveness (X4) have a significant influence on the Intention to Choose a Study Program. Theoretically, this aligns with Consumer Perception Theory, which states that consumer decisions are highly influenced by their perceptions of the image and quality of a product or service. A positive Brand Image is able to build trust, credibility, and confidence in prospective students toward a study program. When the image of a study program reflects good educational quality, clear career prospects, and a supportive academic environment,

the perceived value increases, thereby strengthening the intention to choose the program. This finding is also consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which explains that a positive attitude toward an object (in this case the study program) will enhance a person's intention to make a decision.

The significance of Promotional Effectiveness can also be explained through Integrated Marketing Communication Theory, which emphasizes that effective communication can build knowledge, arouse interest, and influence consumer behavior. Attractive promotional messages, appropriate media channels, and consistent campaigns strengthen informational stimuli, leading prospective students to become more confident and driven to select the study program. Intense and informative promotions increase exposure, minimize uncertainty, and reinforce the belief that the study program is suitable for them.

Meanwhile, the variables Brand Awareness (X1) and Perceived Relevance (X3) are not significant. Theoretically, Brand Awareness is only related to the level of recognition and recall of a brand, but does not necessarily touch the evaluative aspects that can drive intention. Aaker (1991) explains that brand awareness is often an initial requirement, but it does not automatically influence decisions if it is not followed by a strong image or high perceived value. Likewise, the insignificance of Perceived Relevance can be explained through Person Environment Fit Theory, which states that relevance influences decisions only when individuals perceive that such compatibility is highly important for their goals. In this context, the relevance of the study program may be considered important, but it is not a primary factor compared to image and promotion, which play a more dominant role in shaping interest.

Therefore, both theoretically and empirically, the results of the t-test show that the decision to choose a study program is more strongly influenced by perceived quality (brand image) and marketing communication (promotion) rather than mere awareness or perceived relevance. Factors that touch evaluative and emotional domains are proven to be more significant in shaping the intention to choose a study program. The F-test is used to determine the simultaneous influence of all independent variables on the dependent variable in the regression model. Through this test, it can be assessed whether Brand Awareness (X1), Brand Image (X2), Perceived Relevance (X3), and Promotional Effectiveness (X4) collectively have a significant ability to explain variations in Enrollment Intention. The F-test serves as a key indicator of whether the regression model used is appropriate (fit) and whether the combination of variables in the model is capable of explaining the phenomenon being studied. The F-test results are presented in the following table.

Theoretically, this result is in line with the concept of the Consumer Behavior Model, which explains that an individual's decision or intention is rarely determined by a single factor, but rather by a combination of various aspects such as brand perception, perceived value, and the effectiveness of marketing communication. Therefore, the simultaneous influence of the variables in the model shows that prospective students' decisions to choose a study program are the result of the interaction of several factors at once, not just one separate variable. This

result reinforces that the regression model used is relevant and reliable as a basis for further analysis.

The coefficient of determination test is used to determine the extent to which the independent variables are able to explain variations in the dependent variable. In this study, the determination test aims to examine the contribution of Brand Awareness (X1), Brand Image (X2), Perceived Relevance (X3), and Promotional Effectiveness (X4) in explaining Enrollment Intention (Y). The coefficient of determination (R^2) provides an overview of the strength of the regression model, indicating whether the model is able to explain the phenomenon well or whether the variation is still influenced by other factors outside the study. The results of the determination test are presented in the following table.

Theoretically, this R^2 value is in line with the Theory of Planned Behavior which explains that an individual's intention is formed by multiple psychological and environmental factors. Since the decision to choose a study program is a complex decision involving cognitive, emotional, and social evaluations, it is unsurprising that the model is able to explain only around 50% of the behavioral variation. Furthermore, according to Ghozali (2018), an R^2 value of 0.50 falls within the moderate category and is considered satisfactory in social research, as human behavior tends to be influenced by numerous variables that cannot be fully accommodated within a single regression model.

Therefore, this determination value indicates that the regression model used is sufficiently strong and relevant in explaining the factors influencing enrollment intention, although other external factors also play an important role and may serve as recommendations for future research. The findings of this study show that the variables Brand Image and Promotional Effectiveness have a significant effect on Enrollment Intention, whereas Brand Awareness and Perceived Relevance do not have a significant partial effect. These results indicate that prospective students' decision-making is not solely determined by their familiarity with the existence of a study program, but is more strongly influenced by perceived quality and the effectiveness of marketing communications they receive.

The significant influence of Brand Image demonstrates that the decision to choose a study program is closely related to prospective students' perceptions of the program's reputation, quality, credibility, career prospects, and academic environment. This aligns with the Consumer Perception Theory, which states that positive perceptions of a brand can create trust and confidence, thereby enhancing the intention to choose. In the context of higher education, a strong brand image provides assurance that the study program delivers high academic and professional value, making perceived value a determining factor of behavior (Magasi & Bwemelo, 2024; Miguel, 2025; Sudhana et al., 2023). In addition, Promotional Effectiveness is also proven to have a significant effect on enrollment intention. This finding is consistent with the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), which emphasizes the importance of message clarity, appropriate media selection, and the attractiveness of information to influence consumer decisions. Effective higher-education promotion reduces information uncertainty, increases confidence, and creates an emotional

connection between prospective students and the study program. Since program selection is a long-term decision, informative and persuasive communication becomes a primary stimulus in shaping intention (Margarita et al., 2024; Putri, 2025; Rahmawati, 2025).

On the other hand, Brand Awareness does not have a significant effect despite its positive coefficient direction. This can be explained through the Customer-Based Brand Equity Theory, which states that brand awareness is only the initial stage in building a relationship with consumers. A person may recognize a brand but may not choose it if strong perceptions of quality and benefits are absent. In other words, brand recognition alone is not sufficient to drive intention without a convincing perception of value (Oré, 2023; Paredes et al., 2023). Similarly, the nonsignificant effect of Perceived Relevance indicates that the relevance of the study program to the needs or interests of prospective students has not yet become a dominant factor in determining program selection. This is consistent with the Person-Environment Fit Theory, which states that suitability influences decisions only when it is perceived as highly important. In this study, prospective students appear to be more influenced by emotional and impression-based factors (such as image and promotion) rather than rational considerations of academic or career suitability (Dwitasari et al., 2025; Khaled et al., 2024; Minh, 2024).

Simultaneously, the four independent variables are proven to have a significant effect on enrollment intention, strengthening the view of the Theory of Planned Behavior that intention is shaped by a combination of multiple psychological factors. The determination value of 51.40% indicates that more than half of the variation in enrollment intention is explained by the four variables, while the remaining percentage is influenced by other factors such as education costs, parental influence, campus location, intrinsic motivation, or institutional reputation (Journal, 2024; Juhaidi et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025). Theoretically and empirically, these findings confirm that prospective students' decisions in selecting a study program are more strongly influenced by evaluative and emotional factors—particularly brand image and promotional effectiveness—than by simple levels of brand recognition or perceived relevance. Therefore, strategies to increase student enrollment would be more effective if focused on strengthening program image and optimizing marketing communications that are informative, persuasive, and delivered through targeted media channels (C et al., n.d.; Wijaya et al., 2025; Xaverdino et al., 2024).

Based on the results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with the Heads of the four affected study programs (Sociology of Religion, Sharia Economic Law, Mathematics Education, and Early Childhood Islamic Education), it can be concluded that the decline in new student enrollment is not solely due to external factors, such as increased competition among higher education institutions and the decreasing interest in pursuing higher education, but is also influenced by weak internal promotional strategies and the underutilization of program strengths. The Heads of Study Programs emphasized that strengthening communication and promotion strategies based on each program's competitive advantages should be the main priority in increasing prospective students'

intention to enroll. This is crucial because every program has distinct academic characteristics and career prospects, meaning that promotional approaches must be tailored specifically rather than being generalized or concentrated solely at the university level.

The Heads of Study Programs also stressed that the primary strategic solution is promotional decentralization, by providing space and budget allocation for each program to develop independent marketing strategies. This approach enables each program to build a strong academic narrative and highlight its differentiating advantages, such as unique curricula, student achievements, laboratory facilities, industrial partnerships, and scholarship opportunities. In addition, rebranding and repositioning of academic image are considered essential, particularly for programs with low public understanding of career opportunities, such as Sociology of Religion and Early Childhood Islamic Education. This rebranding effort can be developed by delivering data-based information and success stories of alumni working across various professional fields. The discussion further highlighted the importance of synergistic collaboration among Study Programs, the Public Relations Office (HUMAS), and the New Student Admission Team (PMB) through a more structured division of roles. The Heads of Study Programs suggested that promotional activities should not be centralized solely at the university level, but also supported by dedicated program-level teams actively involved in school visits, academic seminars, career workshops, and open-campus events. Strengthening partnerships with schools through formal MoUs, organizing academic events at schools, and implementing student mentoring programs are viewed as effective strategies to improve brand awareness and student interest.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

The results of the study indicate that prospective students' decisions in choosing a study program are primarily influenced by perceived quality (brand image) and the effectiveness of promotional communication that appeals to emotional and evaluative aspects. Direct outreach to schools and social media promotion, particularly through TikTok and Instagram, were found to be the most effective media channels. The decline in new student enrollment over the past two years is mainly attributed to weaknesses in internal promotional strategies, low brand awareness, insufficient collaboration with schools, and ineffective delivery of program advantages. The FGD findings involving Heads of Study Programs, students, the Public Relations division (HUMAS), and the Admissions Team (PMB) emphasize the urgency of decentralized promotion, integrated collaboration between Study Programs–HUMAS–PMB, digital innovation through storytelling and experiential content, strengthening the official PMB website, and active involvement of students and alumni as brand ambassadors. Expert interviews confirm that declining enrollment is a national phenomenon influenced by increasing competition among universities and changing preferences of young people who are more inclined to work than pursue higher education. Therefore, the main strategies for improving enrollment include strengthening institutional branding, implementing a promotional mix of 70% digital and 30% offline, and establishing

formal and sustainable partnerships with schools to enhance competitiveness and restore new student growth at UIN Palopo.

It is recommended that promotional strategies be decentralized to the Program Study level with adequate budget support, human resources, and authority, while strengthening institutional and program branding through academic narratives that highlight curriculum advantages, career prospects, and student and alumni achievements. Promotion should adopt an experiential marketing approach through authentic storytelling content on digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, supported by active involvement of students and alumni as brand ambassadors. Formal and sustainable partnerships with schools need to be expanded through MoU agreements, roadshows, open campus activities, and student career mentoring programs. In addition, an integrated digital promotion system should be enhanced through a more interactive PMB website, implementing a strategy of 70% digital and 30% offline promotion, and providing a dedicated budget for paid digital campaigns. Collaborative synergy between Study Programs, Public Relations, and the PMB team must be strengthened through clear role division and regular performance evaluation, positioning graduate quality and academic achievements as the primary foundation for building public trust and a sustainable positive image.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on a single institution, UIN Palopo, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other higher education institutions. Second, the quantitative analysis focuses on four dimensions of brand equity and their influence on prospective students' enrollment intention, while other potentially relevant factors, such as tuition fees, service quality, social influence, and perceived career prospects, are not examined. Third, the study is conducted within a specific regional and institutional context, which may influence students' perceptions and decision-making.

Future research could expand the study by involving multiple higher education institutions across different regions to enable comparative analysis and improve generalizability. Further studies could also incorporate additional determinants of enrollment intention and examine the long-term relationship between sustainable student recruitment, institutional sustainability, human capital development, and regional development. Longitudinal research may also provide deeper insights into how brand equity and communication strategies contribute to sustained student enrollment over time.

Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

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During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language editing, grammar improvement, manuscript structuring, and refinement of ideas and wording. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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