

Determining Factors for Students' Decision to Choose Private Islamic Religious Universities: The Role of Word of Mouth and Brand Image

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the influence of word of mouth and brand image on students' decisions in choosing a university at the Imam Syafii Islamic Religious Institute (IMSYA) Indonesia. This study uses a quantitative approach with a type of causal associative research. The population in this study is all students in the first semester of the 2025/2026 batch which totals 456 students, with a sample of 213 respondents determined using the Slovin formula. The data collection technique was carried out through a questionnaire with a Likert scale, which has been tested for validity and reliability. Data analysis used prerequisite tests, F tests, and determination coefficients with the help of SPSS. The results of the study show that word of mouth and brand image partially or simultaneously have a significant effect on students' decisions in choosing higher education. Brand image has a more dominant influence than word of mouth. Overall, both variables make a considerable contribution in explaining student decisions. These findings show that positive social communication and a strong institutional image, especially based on religious values, are important factors in increasing student interest, even in relatively newly developed universities.

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INTRODUCTION

Competition between universities in attracting the interest of prospective students is getting tighter along with the increasing number of higher education institutions and the variety of study program options offered. Universities are no longer only required to provide quality academic services, but also able to build attractiveness and trust in the eyes of the public. In these conditions, the decision of prospective students in determining higher education is a strategic aspect that is very important for the sustainability and success of higher education institutions.

Students' decisions in choosing a university are a complex process and are influenced by various factors, both internal and external. Internal factors include interests, talents, and career goals, while external factors include the university's reputation, quality of service, tuition fees, family influence, and information obtained from the social environment. Among these external factors, word of mouth and brand image are believed to

have a very significant role in shaping student perceptions and decisions. Word of mouth communication and the brand image of educational institutions are crucial elements in shaping their perceptions and preferences (Sudarmin, 2023). This phenomenon is reinforced by the tendency of individuals to rely on information coming from their social environment, as it is considered more honest and objective than formal promotion (Fakhrudin et al., 2021).

From the perspective of consumer behavior, students' decisions in choosing a university are a form of consumer decision-making process, which is the process when individuals identify needs, seek information, evaluate alternatives, and finally make choices for an educational service. In the context of higher education, prospective students act as consumers who consider various factors before making decisions, such as information from the social environment, the reputation of the institution, and perceptions of the quality of

educational services. According to Kotler & Keller (2016), consumer decisions are strongly influenced by social factors and perceptions of brands, which in the context of this study are reflected through Word of mouth and Brand image. The findings are also strengthened by recent research showing that interpersonal communication and institutional image are important determinants in shaping students' preferences and decisions in choosing a college (Nuseir & El Refae, 2022). Thus, theoretically Word of mouth and Brand Image has a strong relationship in influencing students' decisions in choosing a university.

Word of mouth is a form of informal communication between individuals that contains experiences, assessments, or recommendations about a university. Information conveyed through word of mouth tends to be considered more credible because it comes from parties who are considered neutral, such as friends, family, alumni, or active students (Ismail & Chris, 2016). In the context of higher education, the positive and negative experiences shared by these parties can directly influence the interests and decisions of prospective students in choosing a particular university. By The brand image of universities is also an important factor in student decision-making. Brand image reflects the public's perception, belief, and impression of an educational institution, which is formed through academic quality, graduate achievements, accreditation, facilities, and institutional image that is built consistently (Bang et al., 2016). Universities with a strong and positive brand image tend to attract prospective students more easily because they are considered to have reliable quality and reputation.

A number of previous studies have shown that word of mouth and brand image have a significant influence on students' decisions in choosing educational institutions. Research conducted by Wulandari & Irwansyah (2025) It was found that word of mouth communication had a positive and significant effect on students' decisions in choosing study programs in college. Information obtained from friends, family, and the social environment has been proven to be able to influence students' perception of an educational institution so as to encourage the formation of decisions to choose a certain study program.

Other research conducted by Aminah et al., (2025) shows that electronic word of mouth (e-

WOM) and brand image have a significant influence on students' decisions in choosing a university. In the study, it was explained that recommendations spread through social media and digital interaction are able to form a positive perception of educational institutions so as to increase students' interest in choosing the university.

In addition, the research Laksono et al., (2023) Regarding the influence of electronic word of mouth on new students' decisions in choosing a university, it shows that digital communication that occurs through various online platforms can be an important means in higher education marketing strategies. Information spread through digital social networks can affect the perception of prospective students on the quality and reputation of a university.

Other recent research conducted by Ramadan et al., (2026) It was found that word of mouth plays a role in shaping the brand image of educational institutions and indirectly influences the decision to choose a school or educational institution. The results of the study show that positive experiences conveyed by individuals in social networks are able to build a good institutional image in the eyes of the community so as to increase the trust of prospective students.

This phenomenon can also be found in one of the Islamic religious universities in Riau, namely the Imam Syafii Islamic Religious Institute (IMSYA) Indonesia. Even though it is classified as a relatively new institution and has only been established for about five years, the IMSYA Indonesia Institute is able to show significant developments in attracting the interest of prospective students. Based on preliminary data obtained from the institution, the number of active students in the last year has reached nearly 1,000 people. When compared to several other Private Islamic Universities in Riau Province that have been established for a longer time, the existence of the IMSYA Indonesia Institute shows the potential as one of the institutions that is able to compete in attracting the interest of prospective students.

Interestingly, based on the results of initial interviews with several students, it is known that the cost of education factor is not the main consideration in their decision to choose the college. The tuition fees that must be paid by students reach around IDR 4,000,000 per semester, which is relatively high for the category of Private Universities in the Riau region.

However, this condition does not reduce students' interest in continuing their studies at the institution.

In addition, the results of the initial interviews also showed that the students of the IMSYA Institute Indonesia were not only from the Riau Province area, but also from various regions outside the province, and there were even students from abroad, such as Malaysia. Some students stated that one of the main reasons they chose the IMSYA Indonesia Institute was because of the image of the campus known as a "sunnah campus" or having a scientific approach oriented to Islamic understanding based on manhaj salaf. The image is considered to be in accordance with their religious beliefs and preferences, thus becoming a factor that strengthens the decision to choose the institution as a place to continue their education.

Although various previous studies have discussed the influence of word of mouth and brand image on consumer decisions or student decisions in choosing educational institutions, most of these studies still focus on universities that have had a reputation and existence for a long time. Research examining how these two factors play a role in increasing student interest in relatively new universities, especially in private Islamic religious universities, is still limited. Therefore, further study is needed to understand how word of mouth and brand image contribute to students' decisions in choosing Private Islamic Religious Universities in the context of newly developed institutions such as the IMSYA Indonesia Institute.

Based on the research gap, the novelty in this study lies in the context and analysis approach used. This study not only examines the influence of word of mouth and brand image on students' decisions in choosing a university, but also places it in the context of relatively newly developed Islamic religious universities. In addition, this study reveals how the image of institutions based on religious values, such as the campus identity known as the "sunnah campus", can form a strong brand image and influence student perceptions and decisions, even when the cost of education is relatively high. Thus, this research is expected to provide a new perspective on the role of social communication and the image of religious values-based institutions in increasing the attractiveness of universities that are still in the early stages of development.

Based on this description, this study aims to analyze the influence of word of mouth and brand image on students' decisions in choosing a university at the IMSYA Indonesia Institute. The results of this research are expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of higher education marketing studies and provide practical implications for university managers in formulating communication strategies and strengthening the image of the institution to increase the attractiveness of prospective students.

METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with a type of causal associative research, which is a study that aims to determine the cause-effect relationship between two or more variables, especially to see the influence of independent variables on bound variables (Arikunto, 2018). A quantitative approach is used to analyze the relationship and influence between word of mouth and brand image variables on students' decisions in determining universities. This research was conducted at the IMSYA Indonesia Institute, one of the Private Islamic Religious Universities (PTKIS) located in Riau Province and has experienced a significant increase in the number of students in recent years. The population in this study is all students in the first semester of the 2025/2026 batch which totals 456 students. The number of samples in the study was determined using the Slovin formula with an error rate of 5%, so that a sample of 213 respondents was obtained.

The data collection technique was carried out using a questionnaire with a Likert scale consisting of five alternative answers, namely strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The research instruments are prepared based on Word of Mouth indicators, Brand Image and student decisions that are relevant to the theoretical study. Before use, the instrument is tested through validity tests and reliability tests to ensure the feasibility and consistency of the measuring instrument (Scott, 2021). Data analysis was carried out with the help of the SPSS application, including analysis prerequisite tests (normality, multicollinearity and heteroskedasticity), and hypothesis tests using partial tests (t-test), simultaneous tests (F-tests) and determination coefficients (R^2). This analysis aims to determine the magnitude of the influence of Word of Mouth and Brand Image on students'

decisions in determining higher education significantly.

the analysis prerequisites are first carried out which include normality, multicollinearity and heteroscedasticity tests to ensure that the data meet the basic assumptions in multiple linear regression analysis.

DISCUSSION

Analysis Prerequisites Test

Before the regression analysis is carried out,

**Table 1. Normality Test
One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test**

		Unstandardized Residual
N		213
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Red	,0000000
	Std. Deviation	3,00801271
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	,112
	Positive	,083
	Negative	-,112
Test Statistic		,112
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.072 ^c

- a. Test distribution is Normal.
- b. Calculated from data.
- c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

Based on Table 1, the results of the normality test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov One-Sample showed a significance value of 0.072. Since these values are greater than 0.05 (0.072 >

0.05), it can be concluded that the residual data is normally distributed. This indicates that one of the assumptions in the regression analysis has been met.

**Table 2 Multicollonarity Test
Coefficient**

Models		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	Tolerance	VIVID
1	(Constant)	,444	1,683			
	Word of Mouth	,325	,080	,227	,789	1,267
	Brand Image	,691	,069	,558	,789	1,267

a. Dependent Variable: Student Decision

Furthermore, based on Table 2 of the multicollinearity test results, it is known that the tolerance value for each variable is 0.789 (> 0.1) and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) value is 1.267 (< 10). Thus, it can be concluded that there

are no symptoms of multicollinearity between independent variables. This means that the word of mouth and brand image variables are not highly correlated with each other, so they are suitable for use in regression models.

**Table 3 Heteroscedasticity Test
Coefficient**

Models		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3,673	1,183		3,105	,002
	Word of Mouth	-,033	,056	-,046	-,591	,555
	Brand Image	-,038	,049	-,060	-,775	,439

a. Dependent Variable: Student Decision

Based on Table 3 of the results of the Glejser test, it was obtained that the significance value of the word of mouth variable was 0.555 > 0.05 and the brand image variable was 0.439 > 0.05. Since the significance value of the two

variables is greater than 0.05, it can be concluded that there are no symptoms of heteroscedasticity in the regression model. Thus, the regression model in this study has met the assumption of homogeneity, making it suitable for further

analysis. This shows that the residual variance is constant and there are no deviations that can affect the accuracy of the regression analysis results.

The fulfillment of the prerequisite test (normality, multicollinearity and heterosidactuality) shows that the regression model used has met the basic assumptions, so that the analysis carried out can produce valid and scientifically accountable estimates (Ghozali,

2018; Sugiyono, 2021; Riyanto & Hatmawan, 2020).

The Influence of Word of Mouth and Brand Image on Student Decisions

To determine the influence of word of mouth and brand image on student decisions both in each variable and or together, it was carried out by the t-test (partial) and the F-test (simultaneous).

Table 4 Partial Test Coefficient

Models	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	,444	1,683		,264	,792
	Word of Mouth	,325	,080	,227	4,050	,000
	Brand Image	,691	,069	,558	9,964	,000

a. Dependent Variable: Student Decision

Based on the results of the partial test (t-test) above, it is known that the word of mouth variable has a significance value of $0.000 < 0.05$, so it can be concluded that word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on student decisions. Thus, the first hypothesis (H1) is accepted.

Partially, word of mouth has been proven to have a positive and significant influence on student decisions. This shows that information obtained from social environments such as friends, family, alumni, and active students has an important role in shaping the perception and beliefs of prospective students. Information that is informal tends to be considered more credible and trustworthy compared to formal promotions carried out by institutions. These findings are in line with research Arrofiq & Mulyana (2025), which states that interpersonal communication has great power in influencing individual decisions.

Furthermore, the brand image variable also has a significance value of $0,000 < 0.05$, so it can be concluded that brand image has a positive and significant effect on student decisions. Thus, the second hypothesis (H2) is accepted. When viewed

from the value of the regression coefficient (B), the brand image variable has a greater value than word of mouth, which shows that brand image has a more dominant influence in influencing students' decisions. This shows that the perception of the institution's image is the main factor in determining student decisions. In the context of this research, the brand image not only reflects academic quality, but also includes the religious values inherent in the institution, such as the institution's identity as a "sunnah campus". In line with opinion Qomusuddin & Romlah (2021), the image of the institution of the higher education institution is a special attraction for students who have the suitability of values and religious preferences.

These findings indicate that in the context of religious-based universities, emotional factors and ideological values have a stronger influence than social communication factors alone. Students not only consider the information they receive, but also the suitability of their identity with the values carried by higher education institutions (Cholila & Syahdanur, 2017).

Table 5 Simultaneous Tests (F) NEW ERA

Models	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	1768,104	2	884,052	96,784	,000b
	Residual	1918,206	210	9,134		
	Total	3686,310	212			

a. Dependent Variable: Student Decision

b. Predictors: (Constant), Brand Image, Word of Mouth

Based on Table 5, an $F_{\text{-value}}$ of 96.784 was obtained with a significance level of 0.000. Because the significance value is less than 0.05 ($0.000 < 0.05$), it can be concluded that word of mouth and brand image simultaneously have a significant effect on students' decisions in choosing a university.

These results show that these two variables together have an important role in shaping student decisions. The more positive the information received through word of mouth and the stronger the brand image owned by the institution, the higher the tendency of students to choose higher education. Thus, student decisions are not only influenced by one factor, but are the result of a combination of social communication and perception of the institution's image.

These findings are in line with research Baskara & Ernasari (2018); Khotana et al. (2024); Oktaviani & Harwani (2023), which states that

word of mouth communication and brand image together affect students' decisions in choosing a study program. In addition, the research Pramesti & Rahanatha (2019) It also shows that the brand image formed through word of mouth communication also strengthens the decision in choosing an educational institution. Therefore, universities need to optimize communication strategies based on student experience and build a solid and consistent religious-based positive institutional image to increase attractiveness for prospective students.

The Contribution of Word of Mouth and Brand Image to Student Decisions

To determine the amount of contribution of word of mouth and brand image variables to student decisions, a determination coefficient (R^2) analysis was used.

Table 6 Coefficients Terminated (R^2)

Model Summary^b				
Models	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,693a	,480	,475	3,022

a. Predictors: (Constant), Brand Image, Word of Mouth

b. Dependent Variable: Student Decision

Based on Table 6, it is known that the value of the determination coefficient (R^2) is 0.480 or 48.0%. This shows that the variable word of mouth and brand image are simultaneously able to explain the variation in student decisions in choosing a university of 48.0%, which is included in the category of moderate influence. Meanwhile, the remaining 52.0% was influenced by other variables outside the research model, such as education cost factors, quality of academic services, facilities, location, and the influence of family and social environment that were not studied in this study. Thus, the results of this study confirm that it is not enough for university marketing strategies to rely only on formal promotion, but it is necessary to optimize the power of word of mouth through positive student experiences and build a strong, consistent, and relevant brand image to the values believed by prospective students.

These findings indicate that although word of mouth and brand image are important factors, students' decisions in choosing a university are multidimensional and influenced by various other factors. The results of this study are in line with previous research which stated that students'

decisions are not only influenced by social communication and institutional image, but also by other rational and emotional factors (Aminah et al., 2025). Therefore, Islamic religious colleges that are starting to develop should not only strengthen communication strategies through word of mouth and build a positive brand image, but also improve the quality of services and other supporting factors to increase the attractiveness of the institution as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that word of mouth and brand image have a significant effect on students' decisions in choosing a Private Islamic Religious University at the IMSYA Indonesia Institute. Information obtained through interpersonal communication is able to form a positive perception of students towards the institution, while the brand image built through identity as a "Sunnah Campus" is an important factor in strengthening students' confidence in making choices. Theoretically, this study strengthens the study of consumer behavior in the context of higher education, especially regarding the role of word of mouth and brand

image in influencing students' decisions to choose universities, and shows that the image of institutions based on religious values can be a force in building the attractiveness of educational institutions. Practically, the results of this research can be an input for managers of Private Islamic Religious Universities in developing communication strategies and strengthening the image of the institution through positive experiences of students, alumni, and consistent campus identities. This research still has limitations because it is only carried out on one institution and uses two independent variables, so the next research is recommended to expand the research object and add other variables such as service quality, facilities, education costs, and family influence in order to obtain more comprehensive results.

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