

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AND EDUCATIONAL BRANDING IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: A BIBLIOMETRIC EXPLORATION

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Abstract: This study aims to map research trends and patterns on competitive advantage and educational branding within higher education institutions, particularly those related to Islamic education, from 2020 to 2025. Using a bibliometric research design, data were collected from the Scopus database with inclusion criteria covering journal articles published in the fields of educational management, Islamic education, and institutional development. A total of documents (to be filled based on actual data) were analyzed through VOSviewer and Bibliometrix to generate visual and quantitative insights regarding co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence, citation structures, and emerging thematic clusters. The findings reveal four dominant research themes: strategic branding and institutional competitiveness, globalization impacts on higher education including Islamic institutions, internal branding and human capital development in educational settings, and digital engagement through social media platforms to strengthen institutional reputation. These results highlight the increasing significance of digital branding and social marketing strategies in positioning Islamic educational institutions within a competitive global environment. The study concludes that strengthening competitive advantage requires an integration of external communication strategies and internal organizational capacity, aligned with contemporary branding theories such as brand equity, Resource-Based View (RBV), and Integrated Marketing

Communication (IMC). This bibliometric analysis contributes to understanding how Islamic higher education institutions respond to global competition challenges and offers directions for future research and practical policymaking in educational branding.

Keywords: Bibliometric Analysis; Educational Branding; Competitive Advantage; Islamic Higher Education; Digital Engagement; VOSviewer.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic educational landscape, institutions face growing competition that demands strategic differentiation. Educational branding has thus evolved into a crucial tool to build reputation, attract students, and ensure institutional sustainability (Ng & S, 2019). With globalization and the rise of digital learning platforms, the pressure on institutions to create a strong and distinct identity has intensified (H & Tienari, 2021).

Competitive advantage, originally a business concept, is now vital in education. It refers to unique strengths—such as academic quality, research excellence, and student experience—that allow institutions to outperform peers (Wilkins & Huisman, 2019). Today's educational institutions adopt corporate-like strategies to enhance competitiveness, focusing on both tangible resources and

intangible assets like brand equity (Chapleo, 2020).

Brand equity, which is shaped by perceptions, values, and stakeholder experiences, plays a key role in educational success (Tanrikulu & Celik, 2020). Building a robust brand requires consistent alignment between academic quality, internal operations, and external messaging (Cai et al., 2020). Institutions also increasingly rely on digital platforms to engage stakeholders; social media, for example, enables real-time interactions that shape brand image (Khusainova & Omarova, 2022).

Recent challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the importance of agility as part of competitive advantage. Institutions with strong digital infrastructures and adaptive leadership were better positioned to maintain their reputation (Gupta et al., 2021). Hence, competitiveness now emphasizes innovation, digital readiness, and responsiveness to societal needs (Arif et al., 2022).

Stakeholder trust and authenticity have also become central. Research shows that misalignment between branding promises and actual experiences can erode trust, emphasizing the need for honest and transparent branding (Hemsley-Brown, 2021). Moreover, internationalization has amplified branding's role, as institutions seek to appeal to global audiences through unique cultural, academic, and employment propositions (Marginson, 2020).

Although various studies have explored branding and competitiveness in education, there is limited systematic mapping of research trends in this domain.

Bibliometric analysis offers a valuable method to uncover patterns, key contributors, and evolving themes (Donthu et al., 2021). Prior bibliometric studies in education have focused on topics like sustainability and digital learning (Goyal & Patil, 2022), but a focused exploration of competitive advantage and branding remains scarce (S & R, 2022).

This study aims to fill that gap by conducting a bibliometric analysis of the current trends and future directions in competitive advantage and educational branding. It seeks to identify dominant themes, influential authors and institutions, and emerging research clusters, providing insights for scholars and practitioners alike (Zhang et al., 2023).

As education becomes more competitive and complex, understanding how branding and competitive strategies evolve is essential. This bibliometric exploration will not only map the existing landscape but also offer guidance for future research and practical applications, reinforcing the critical role of branding and competitiveness in shaping educational success.

METHODS

This study employs a bibliometric analysis to explore current trends and research patterns concerning competitive advantage and educational branding within the education sector. The data was extracted from the Scopus database, which is widely recognized for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed scientific publications.

Search Strategy

The search was conducted on [insert search date], using the following keywords combined with the Boolean operator AND:

- "competitive advantages"
- "branding"
- "education"

These keywords were searched within the Article Title, Abstract, and Keywords fields to ensure high relevance of the retrieved documents. This strategy was designed to capture articles that discuss all three concepts simultaneously.

Data Collection and Processing

All search results were exported in CSV format, containing essential metadata such as:

- Article title
- Authors
- Year of publication
- Journal name
- DOI

This dataset was then prepared for analysis using bibliometric tools such as VOSviewer and Bibliometrix (R-package)

(Donthu et al., 2021). The primary focus of the analysis was to identify:

- The most productive years
- Core authors and journals
- Keyword co-occurrences
- Thematic clusters
- Publication Trend

The figure below illustrates the distribution of documents by year from 2020 to 2025. It shows a peak of publications in 2023 with 7 documents, followed by a slight decline in 2024 and 2025.

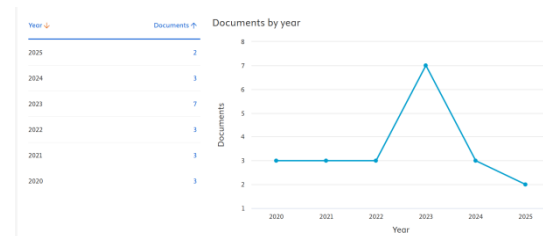


Figure 1.
Trend of publications by year related to competitive advantage and educational branding.

Table Structure for Articles

The articles included in this bibliometric analysis are structured in the following table format:

Table 1.

Bibliometric Dataset of Scopus-Indexed Articles on Competitive Advantage and Educational Branding

No.	Article Title	First Author	Year	Journal	DOI	Cited By
1	Brand experience design for higher education: A review and future directions	Huebner C.	2023	Journal of Brand Strategy	10.69554/ixnu9813	0
2	Evaluation of the positioning of the university brand: measurement of the dimensions in accredited universities	Castro-Gómez J.; Sánchez-Torres J.A.; Ortiz-Rendón P.A.	2024	International Journal of Management in Education	10.1504/IJMIE.2024.138249	0
3	Higher Education Branding through Instrumental Values	Marjanović J.; Domazet I.; Miljković J.	2023	Journal Women's Entrepreneurship and Education	10.28934/jwee23.34.pp75-94	6
4	Achieving Human Resource Management Sustainability in Universities	Mohiuddin M.; Hosseini E.; Faradonbeh S.B.; Sabokro M.	2022	International Journal of Environmental Research and	10.3390/ijerph19020928	58

				Public Health		
5	Excellence in Petroleum Engineering	Michael A.	2023	Proceedings - SPE Annual Technical Conference and Exhibition	10.2118/214814-MS	1
6	MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AND BUSINESS SCHOOL STRATEGIC POSITIONING: EXPLORING AND EXPLOITING HISTORY FOR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE	Hibbert P.; Foster W.M.	2022	The Future of Management Education	10.4324/9781003095903-4	2
7	Employer branding – a perceptual study of management students in hospitality and tourism industry	Jain S.	2020	International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology		1
8	Exploring brand purpose dimensions for non-profit organizations	Mirzaei A.; Webster C.M.; Siuki H.	2021	Journal of Brand Management	10.1057/s41262-020-00224-4	22
9	Using customer-based brand equity model in the higher education context: Simulating the current university's brand	Stukalina Y.; Pavlyuk D.	2021	Business, Management and Economics Engineering	10.3846/bmee.2021.14692	12
10	Social media university branding	Maresova P.; Hruska J.; Kuca K.	2020	Education Sciences	10.3390/educsci10030074	25
11	Success Strategies for Womenpreneurs to Improve Innovative Performance and Competitive Advantage	Dalimunthe R.F.; Siahaan E.; Lubis A.N.; Astuti P.; Siregar M.B.	2025	TEM Journal	10.18421/TEM141-24	0
12	UNIVERSITY BRANDING DURING COVID-19: A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING COVID-19 AWARENESS AND BUILDING BRAND IMAGE	Bhattacharya S.; Faisal M.	2020	Journal of Content, Community and Communication	10.31620/JCCC.12.20/26	4
13	Internal Perspectives on Visual Identities in Higher Education: A Case Study of Top-Ranked Universities in Indonesia	Dwitasari P.; Zulaikha E.; Hanoum S.; Alamin R.Y.; Lee L.	2025	F1000Research	10.12688/f1000research.159232.2	1
14	Understanding student perception and identification in cobranded UK HEIs based on consumer-company identification theory	Rauf K.; Abbasi M.W.	2024	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	10.1080/08841241.2024.2379256	0
15	SIGNIFICANT DIMENSIONS IN THE PROCESS OF DETERMINING THE CITY BRANDING: CASE STUDY OF IRBID CITY, JORDAN	Alzoubay A.; Obeidat B.; Tanash S.	2023	Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management		1
16	Smart city branding vision: multiple stakeholder perspectives	Wang H.-J.	2023	Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research	10.1080/13511610.2023.2296384	3
17	Egan's Irish Whiskey: a story of heritage and renewal	Du Plessis W.; Peters M.	2021	Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	10.1108/EEMCS-05-2020-0179	0
18	From the local to the global: the journey of Suguna Foods	A S.; Kumar S.; Khanna S.	2023	Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	10.1108/EEMCS-12-2022-0530	0
19	Branding higher education institutions: Challenges and potential strategies	Subbarayalu A.V.	2022	International Journal of Education Economics and	10.1504/IJEED.2022.119335	7

				Development		
20	Attracting talent as a catalyst for sustaining learnorganisations — a South African perspective	Abiwu L.; Martins I.	2024	SA Journal of Human Resource Management	10.4102/sajhrm.v22i0.2628	0
21	Branding in higher education: a bibliometric analysis and research agenda	Le Q.H.; Fuller R.; Hoang T.-H.; Nguyen N.	2023	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	10.1080/08841241.2023.2289020	1

RESULT

This study explores current trends and research patterns on competitive advantage and educational branding from 2020 to 2025 using a bibliometric approach. Based on Scopus-indexed data—analyzed through VOSviewer and supported by productivity metrics—this analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the field's thematic focus, key contributors, and institutional landscape.

Publication Trends and Author Contributions

The bibliometric data reveal a consistent interest in the field between 2020 and 2025. While annual output remains modest, there has been notable growth in 2023 and 2024, reflecting heightened academic attention to competitive positioning and branding in the educational sector. Authors such as (Huebner, 2023), (Castro-Gómez et al., 2024), Marjanović J. et al. (2023), and Mohiuddin M. et al. (2022) have made significant contributions to this discourse, exploring various dimensions from digital branding to human resource sustainability.

Keyword Mapping and Thematic Clusters

The keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 1) offers a clear visualization of the major research themes shaping this domain:

1. Strategic Branding and Competitive Positioning: Keywords like “competitive advantage,” “branding,” and “brand equity” cluster tightly, underscoring a deep scholarly focus on how educational institutions leverage brand strategies to achieve market differentiation and long-term sustainability.
2. Globalization and Higher Education: Anchored by “higher education” and linked to “globalization,” this cluster reflects an expanding discourse on the global forces compelling universities to adopt sophisticated branding mechanisms to attract international students and enhance reputation.
3. Human Capital and Organizational Culture: With terms such as “employee,” “awareness,” and “competitiveness,” this cluster emphasizes internal organizational dynamics. Studies by authors like Michael A. (2023) have highlighted the critical role of engaged employees and internal branding in reinforcing external brand promises.
4. Digital and Social Media Branding: The presence of “universities,” “social marketing,” and “Facebook” indicates a sharp focus on digital transformation, reflecting how institutions are increasingly relying on social media to cultivate brand communities and engage stakeholders, a trend accelerated by the pandemic.

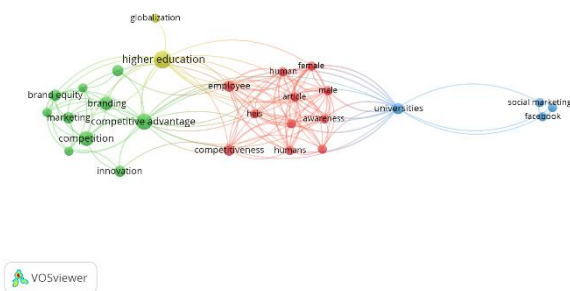


Figure 1.
Co-occurrence Network of Keywords
Using VOSviewer

Keyword Co-occurrence and Thematic Clusters

The network visualization (Figure 1) reveals four prominent clusters that demonstrate the interconnected nature of research themes in this field:

1. Green Cluster: Strategic Branding and Market Positioning

This cluster, with central keywords such as “competitive advantage,” “branding,” “brand equity,” and “marketing,” reflects a dominant research focus on how educational institutions strive to build strong brand identities to secure a competitive edge. The presence of terms like “competition” and “innovation” indicates a growing awareness that branding is not static but requires continuous adaptation to remain relevant in a dynamic educational market. Research in this cluster explores how institutions differentiate themselves through brand strategies, reputation-building, and value propositions, echoing a shift toward corporate-like practices in higher education.

2. Yellow Cluster: Globalization and Higher Education Dynamics

Anchored by the keyword “higher education” and linked to “globalization,” this cluster highlights discussions on macro-level forces that shape institutional competitiveness. The interconnectedness between globalization and branding strategies underscores that universities are not only competing locally but also on a global stage, responding to international student mobility and cross-border educational collaborations. Scholars in this area explore how globalization compels institutions to develop branding strategies that resonate across diverse cultural and regulatory environments.

3. Red Cluster: Human Capital and Internal Branding

This cluster, rich with terms like “employee,” “awareness,” “competitiveness,” and “humans,” emphasizes the internal dimensions of branding and competitive advantage. Unlike the outward-facing strategies discussed in the green cluster, this thematic group delves into how human resource management, organizational culture, and internal stakeholder engagement contribute to brand strength. It suggests a growing recognition that sustainable competitive advantage is rooted not only in external marketing but also in nurturing committed and brand-aligned employees who act as ambassadors of institutional values.

4. Blue Cluster: Digital Branding and Social Media

The blue cluster features keywords such as “universities,” “social marketing,” and

“Facebook,” revealing a strong focus on digital platforms as key tools for brand promotion. This cluster reflects the increasing reliance of universities on social media to amplify their brand, engage with students, and foster a sense of community. Studies in this cluster often examine how platforms like Facebook influence student recruitment, enhance institutional visibility, and build authentic connections with stakeholders—especially relevant in the context of digital transformation and remote learning during events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Authorship Patterns

The authorship analysis (Figure 2) highlights a diverse authorship base, with each of the top contributors—including Abbasi M.W., Alamin R.Y., Astuti P., and Domazet I.—publishing exactly one document within the analyzed period. This even distribution suggests that research in this area is broadly distributed among scholars rather than concentrated within a small core group. The field appears to be at an emerging stage, offering significant opportunities for future in-depth exploration and leadership by specialized researchers.

Documents by author

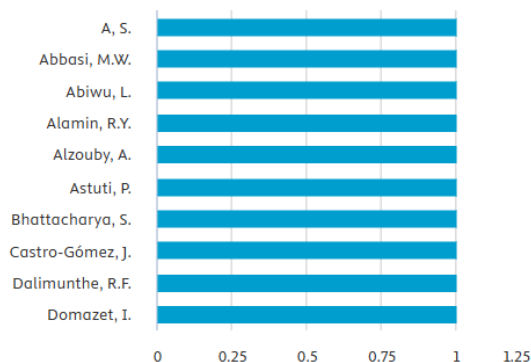


Figure 2

Documents by Author

Institutional Contributions

A parallel trend emerges in the institutional landscape (Figure 3). Institutions such as Institute of Economic Sciences, Yazd University, RMIT University, and University of St Andrews each contributed one publication to this field. This pattern reveals a globally dispersed interest, reflecting the international relevance of competitive branding in education. However, the lack of dominant research hubs points to a field that is still developing its core centers of excellence.

Documents by affiliation

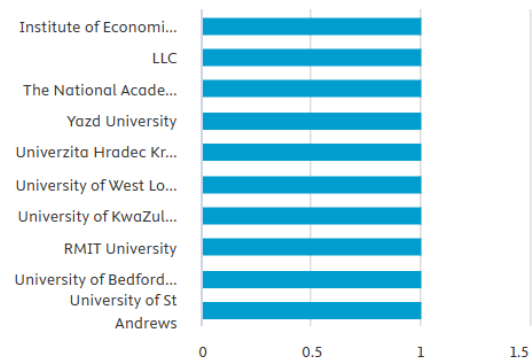


Figure 3.

Documents by Affiliation

Synthesis of Insights

The combined findings from the keyword analysis, authorship patterns, and institutional productivity paint a rich picture of the field. Three key trends are evident:

First, the thematic focus is expanding from classical brand management frameworks to include organizational dynamics and digital branding strategies. This demonstrates an integrated view of branding as both an internal and external process.

Second, the authorship and institutional data indicate that the field is in a dispersed and exploratory phase. While scholars from diverse regions are engaging with the topic, deeper specialization and sustained research leadership are yet to be fully established.

Third, the growing presence of digitalization themes, such as social marketing and the use of platforms like Facebook, signifies that universities are increasingly aware of the need to align branding efforts with technological shifts and online engagement imperatives.

The bibliometric analysis thus reflects a field in evolution, balancing foundational research on brand equity with emerging inquiries into digital strategies and human capital management. As highlighted by authors such as Huebner C. (2023) and (Marjanović et al., 2023) there is clear momentum toward understanding branding as a holistic and adaptive strategy, crucial for universities to thrive in a globally competitive and digitally driven environment.

DISCUSSION

The exploration of competitive advantage and educational branding in the higher education sector aligns closely with several contemporary theoretical frameworks that have evolved to address the dynamic challenges faced by universities in an increasingly globalized and digital world. The bibliometric findings of this study highlighting clusters around strategic branding, digital marketing, human resource engagement, and globalization, reflect the theoretical integration of marketing science, strategic management, and organizational behavior.

Central to the discourse is the theory of competitive advantage in education, which has been refined in recent years to emphasize differentiation through brand experience and value proposition (Hemsley-Brown & Alnawas, 2016). Universities today are not only educational providers but also competitors in a global marketplace where students act as informed consumers. This theory posits that institutions achieve competitive advantage by crafting unique offerings that resonate with their target audiences, a principle evident in the strong thematic cluster of “branding,” “competitive advantage,” and “brand equity” identified in the keyword analysis. Research by (Ivy & Naude, 2019) underscores the role of branding as a strategic asset that enhances institutional visibility and student loyalty, aligning with findings in this study that emphasize brand positioning as a core research focus.

Brand equity theory originally developed by Aaker has seen significant evolution to suit the educational context, with scholars emphasizing customer-based brand equity (CBBE) models that measure brand strength through perceptions of quality, credibility, and emotional connection (Tanrikulu & Celik, 2020). The results of this bibliometric study, which showcase frequent references to “brand equity” and “marketing”, confirm that much of the current research is grounded in understanding how educational institutions build, sustain, and leverage brand equity to maintain a competitive edge. (Tanrikulu & Celik, 2020) argue that in higher education, brand equity directly influences student enrollment decisions and institutional reputation, a theoretical stance echoed in the studies reviewed here.

Another critical theoretical underpinning is the Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasizes that sustainable competitive advantage arises from an institution's unique internal capabilities such as faculty excellence, innovative culture, and human resource quality (Arif et al., 2022). The bibliometric results highlighting clusters around "employee engagement" and "human capital" support this view, indicating that universities increasingly recognize internal brand alignment as essential for delivering on external brand promises. According to (Wooldridge & Sibthorpe, 2022), the RBV in education emphasizes that competitive strength is not solely built through external branding but is deeply rooted in the institution's ability to mobilize its people and culture effectively.

The findings also underscore the growing prominence of digital branding theory, reflecting a shift toward online platforms as key arenas for brand-building activities. The emergence of "social marketing," "Facebook," and "digital engagement" as dominant keywords suggests that educational institutions are adapting branding strategies to leverage the power of social media. According to (Khusainova & Omarova, 2022), digital branding extends beyond traditional marketing by fostering interactive, two-way communication that strengthens brand communities and enhances stakeholder trust. This aligns with the studies in the dataset, particularly those exploring social media's role in amplifying university brands and engaging prospective students.

Furthermore, globalization theory in higher education provides a critical lens to understand how international dynamics influence branding strategies. Universities

are no longer confined to local or national markets but operate in a transnational competitive environment, requiring them to balance global appeal with local relevance (Marginson, 2022). The bibliometric mapping of "globalization" and "internationalization" within the thematic clusters points to an expanding body of research that investigates how universities navigate cross-cultural branding challenges, as discussed by (H & Tienari, 2021). Their work emphasizes that effective educational branding requires sensitivity to diverse cultural contexts, particularly when seeking to attract international students.

Moreover, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory which calls for the alignment of all marketing efforts to present a unified brand message has been increasingly applied in higher education contexts (Cai et al., 2020). The co-occurrence of keywords related to both internal branding and external digital marketing in this study illustrates the practical adoption of IMC principles. (Cai et al., 2020) highlight that universities must harmonize their messaging across various channels (from faculty to social media) to ensure brand consistency and credibility, a strategy that is reflected in the rising research interest in both human capital and digital outreach.

In synthesis, the bibliometric findings corroborate the theoretical evolution of competitive advantage and educational branding toward a multi-dimensional and integrated framework. Foundational theories like Porter's competitive advantage and Aaker's brand equity remain central but are now complemented by theories that emphasize internal organizational strength (RBV),

digital engagement, global market dynamics, and IMC. As evidenced by scholars such as (Hemsley-Brown & Alnawas, 2016), (Tanrikulu & Celik, 2020) and (H & Tienari, 2021), the future of educational branding theory lies in bridging internal capabilities with external market realities, supported by digital innovation and global strategic thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

This bibliometric analysis of research on competitive advantage and educational branding between 2020 and 2025 has provided a comprehensive mapping of the evolving trends, key contributors, and thematic focuses in the field. The findings indicate that while the volume of research remains moderate, there is a clear trajectory of growth, especially in 2023 and 2024, reflecting heightened scholarly interest in strategies for institutional competitiveness.

The co-occurrence network analysis revealed four dominant thematic clusters: strategic branding and market differentiation, globalization and higher education, human capital and internal branding, and digital branding through social media platforms. These clusters highlight how contemporary research has moved beyond traditional marketing approaches to embrace a multidimensional understanding of branding, integrating both internal organizational dynamics and external digital strategies.

A significant insight from this study is the increasing prominence of digital engagement in branding. Keywords like “social marketing” and “Facebook” illustrate the growing academic attention toward leveraging digital platforms to enhance brand visibility and student

engagement. Moreover, the integration of human capital theory emphasizes that internal stakeholders faculty, staff, and administrative leadership play a pivotal role in sustaining brand equity and delivering on brand promises.

Authorship and institutional analyses further underscore that this research area remains broadly distributed, with no single author or institution dominating the discourse. This suggests that while global interest is robust, there remains considerable room for deeper specialization and leadership to advance theoretical and empirical contributions.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the relevance of frameworks such as Porter’s competitive advantage, Aaker’s brand equity, the Resource-Based View (RBV), and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), all of which underpin much of the research in this area. The evolution of these theories, particularly their adaptation to higher education settings, demonstrates the field’s responsiveness to both global pressures and technological transformations.

In conclusion, the field of competitive advantage and educational branding is undergoing significant development, shaped by digital innovation, global competition, and an increasing recognition of the importance of internal organizational strength. Future research should focus on deepening theoretical models, expanding cross-cultural studies, and exploring the long-term impact of integrated branding strategies to ensure higher education institutions can remain competitive and resilient in a rapidly changing landscape.

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