

Beyond Rankings: Cultural–Religious Foundations of Reputation in a Transforming Islamic University

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana transformasi kelembagaan pada perguruan tinggi Islam berbasis pesantren berkontribusi dalam memperkuat reputasi institusi, membangun citra publik yang positif, serta meningkatkan daya tarik di mata masyarakat. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, temuan lapangan, dan dokumentasi institusional, yang selanjutnya dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan empat tema utama. Pertama, transformasi kelembagaan dimaknai sebagai upaya pemulihan status dan martabat institusi melalui narasi historis “kembali ke status universitas”. Kedua, reputasi institusi terutama bertumpu pada modal kultural dan religius pesantren, khususnya kepercayaan publik, otoritas moral kiai, tradisi keilmuan, serta jejaring alumni, yang melampaui indikator rasional seperti pemeringkatan dan fasilitas. Ketiga, citra institusi dibangun melalui tagline Kampus Pelopor Khoiru Ummah, yang dioperasionalkan melalui praktik kehumasan dan program pengembangan karakter yang berakar pada nilai-nilai Satlogi Santri serta Sembilan Nilai Utama Santri. Keempat, daya tarik institusi diperkuat oleh ikatan emosional dan religius dengan masyarakat, sehingga pilihan terhadap perguruan tinggi diposisikan sebagai keputusan moral–spiritual. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pengelolaan perubahan dalam perguruan tinggi Islam akan lebih efektif apabila reformasi kelembagaan diintegrasikan dengan legitimasi kultural religius yang melekat dalam ekosistem pesantren..

Kata Kunci: *Transformasi Kelembagaan, Reputasi Pendidikan Tinggi, Universitas Berbasis Pesantren*

ABSTRACT

This study examines how institutional transformation in a pesantren-based Islamic higher education institution contributes to strengthening reputation, constructing a positive public image, and enhancing community attractiveness. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field findings, and institutional documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal four main themes. First, institutional transformation is interpreted as the restoration of institutional status and dignity through the historical narrative of “returning to university status.” Second, institutional reputation is primarily grounded in the cultural and religious capital of the pesantren, particularly public trust, the moral authority of kiai, scholarly traditions, and alumni networks, which extend beyond rational indicators such as rankings and facilities. Third, the institutional image is constructed through the tagline Kampus Pelopor Khoiru Ummah (Campus as a Pioneer of Khoiru Ummah), which is operationalized through public relations practices and character development programs rooted in Satlogi Santri (student) values and the Nine Noble Virtues of Santri. Fourth, institutional attractiveness is reinforced by emotional and religious bonds with the community, positioning higher education choice as a moral–spiritual decision. These findings indicate that managing change in Islamic higher education is more effective when institutional reforms are integrated with cultural–religious legitimacy embedded within the pesantren ecosystem.

Keywords: *Institutional Transformation, Higher Education Reputation, Pesantren-Based University*

A. Introduction

Institutional transformation has become a central concern in higher education systems worldwide, particularly as universities face increasing pressures related to quality assurance, competition, public accountability, and reputation building^{1,2,3}. Contemporary higher education scholarship shows that universities are no longer evaluated solely on academic outputs, but increasingly on public image, societal trust, and perceived legitimacy among key stakeholders⁴. Empirical studies demonstrate that institutional reputation significantly influences student choice, organizational sustainability, and long-term competitiveness, especially within expanding higher education systems in developing contexts⁵. In the field of Islamic higher education, these dynamics are further complicated by the need to reconcile modern governance demands with religious, cultural, and historical foundations that shape institutional identity⁶. In Indonesia, the transformation of private Islamic higher education institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Swasta/PTKIS) reflects this tension, as institutional change unfolds alongside strong pesantren traditions that continue to structure public trust and moral legitimacy⁷. Consequently, institutional transformation should be understood not merely as a technical or regulatory adjustment, but as a socially and culturally negotiated process that directly shapes reputation and public perception.

Existing literature on higher education transformation generally emphasizes governance reform, managerial efficiency, and performance indicators as key drivers of institutional reputation. Studies on organizational change in universities suggest that transformation processes such as status upgrading, structural reorganization, and strategic branding—can enhance institutional legitimacy when aligned with external quality frameworks and internal capacity

¹ Kgabo Mokgohloa, Grace Kanakana-Katumba, and Rendani Maladzhi, “Development of a Technology and Digital Transformation Adoption Framework of the Postal Industry in Southern Africa: From Critical Literature Review to a Theoretical Framework,” *Advances in Science, Technology and Engineering Systems* 5, no. 6 (2020): 1190–1206, <https://doi.org/10.25046/aj0506143>.

² Hardi Mulyono et al., “Effect of Service Quality Toward Student Satisfaction and Loyalty in Higher Education,” *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business* 7, no. 10 (2020): 929–38, <https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2020.vol7.no10.929>.

³ Pilaiporn Sukcharoen, Nanchatsan Sakunpong, and Kantita Sripa, “Effectiveness of Transformative Learning on Spirituality in Palliative Care among Nursing Students: A Mixed Methods Study,” *Journal of Behavioral Science* 15, no. 3 (2020): 19–33.

⁴ T Ali et al., “Facilitating Sustainable Disaster Risk Reduction in Indigenous Communities: Reviving Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge and Practices Through Two-Way Partnering,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18030855>.

⁵ L H Chiao et al., “Exploring Factors Influencing the Retention of Nurses in a Religious Hospital in Taiwan,” *BMC Nursing* 20, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-021-00558-7>.

⁶ Istiadah et al., “Strategies for Combating Sexual Harassment in Islamic Higher Education,” *Ahkam: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 20, no. 2 (2020): 257–80, <https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v20i2.15412>.

⁷ Agus Zaenul Fitri, Sugeng Listyo Prabowo, and Syamsuddin, “The Development of Islamic Higher Educational Institutions In Southeast Sulawesi of Indonesia: Increasing Competitiveness Through Swot Analysis,” *Academy of Strategic Management Journal* 19, no. 3 (2020): 1–11.

building⁸. At the same time, reputation studies in higher education underline the role of symbolic capital, historical continuity, and stakeholder trust in shaping long-term institutional standing⁹. Recent research has increasingly acknowledged that reputation is socially constructed through narratives, values, and shared meanings, rather than produced solely through rankings or infrastructural investment¹⁰. Within Islamic higher education, scholars have shown that cultural and religious capital, moral authority, and community embeddedness play a decisive role in sustaining institutional reputation¹¹. However, much of this literature treats transformation and reputation as separate analytical domains, with limited attention to how institutional change is interpreted and legitimized within faith-based educational contexts.

Despite these advances, a critical gap remains in understanding how institutional transformation processes in Islamic higher education contribute to reputation building through non-material dimensions such as trust, value attachment, and religious conviction. Previous studies tend to prioritize measurable outcomes such as accreditation status, program expansion, or market competitiveness while underexploring how communities and internal actors make sense of transformation in relation to institutional identity. Moreover, research on pesantren-based universities often focuses on Leadership or curriculum integration, leaving the reputational implications of structural transformation relatively underexamined. This gap is particularly evident in studies of private Islamic universities that undergo repeated status changes, where transformation may be perceived not as innovation, but as restoration of historical identity and moral legitimacy. Addressing this gap offers an opportunity to advance theoretical discussions on reputation by incorporating cultural–religious sensemaking into analyses of higher education transformation.

Responding to this gap, the present study aims to explore how institutional transformation in an Islamic higher education institution contributes to the construction of reputation, positive public image, and societal attractiveness. Rather than measuring reputation through external rankings or performance metrics, this study focuses on how reputation is produced through shared meanings, historical narratives, and value-based relationships with the surrounding community. By examining transformation as a socially embedded process, the study seeks to illuminate how changes in institutional status are interpreted as restoring dignity, reinforcing

⁸ Olesya V. Kuznetsova, Alexey V. Osintsev, and Natalya S. Smolina, “Studies of Religion in High School: Comparative Analysis of the Content of Educational Publications,” *Perspektivy Nauki i Obrazovania* 46, no. 4 (2020): 193–202, <https://doi.org/10.32744/pse.2020.4.13>.

⁹ A D Del Pino and A A Garcia, “Branding Digital in Higher Education Institutions: Theoretical Contexts of Digital Branding in Universities,” in *Improving University Reputation Through Academic Digital Branding*, 2020, 13–29, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-4930-8.ch002>.

¹⁰ M L Clodoveo et al., “Protected Geographical Indications for EVOO in Tunisia: Towards Environmental, Social, and Economic Sustainable Development,” *Sustainability* 13, no. 20 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011201>.

¹¹ Istiadah et al., “Strategies for Combating Sexual Harassment in Islamic Higher Education.”

trust, and extending the moral authority of pesantren into the university sphere. This focus allows the research to contribute both empirically and conceptually to discussions on reputation in higher education.

The central argument advanced in this study is that institutional transformation strengthens reputation most effectively when it is grounded in cultural and religious legitimacy rather than purely rational–instrumental considerations. Through a qualitative case study approach, the research explores how trust, value attachment, and religious conviction shape public responses to institutional change. In doing so, the study positions transformation as a process of meaning-making that integrates managerial reform with deeply rooted social and religious expectations. This analytical focus provides a foundation for understanding reputation not as an outcome of competition alone, but as a relational and value-based construct, thereby setting the stage for the methodological approach outlined in the following section.

B. Method

This research uses a qualitative research design with a case study type to gain an in-depth understanding of the transformation process of higher education in building reputation, positive image, and community attractiveness¹². The case study design was chosen because it allows researchers to examine phenomena in a real-world context, holistically and without separating them from the social, cultural, and historical contexts that surround them. The location of the research was determined at the Zainul Hasan Islamic University (UNZAH), Genggong, East Java, with the consideration that this institution has significant historical experience of institutional transformation and strong links with the tradition of Islamic boarding schools that the community has long trusted, so it is relevant to the focus of the research. The qualitative approach is used because this study emphasizes the interpretation of the subject's meaning, perception, and experience regarding institutional change, as well as the exploration of narratives and the construction of meaning that develops through social interaction in the context of pesantren-based universities.

Data collection in this study was conducted through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the institutional transformation process. In-depth interviews were chosen to elicit informants' views, experiences, and judgments. At the same time, field findings were used to capture real-world practices, interaction patterns, and institutional symbols that are not always revealed in verbal narratives. Documentation studies trace the formal records of institutional changes, policies, and official narratives developed by colleges. In this process, the researcher serves as the primary instrument,

¹² M K Alam, "A Systematic Qualitative Case Study: Questions, Data Collection, NVivo Analysis and Saturation," *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 16, no. 1 (2021): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-09-2019-1825>.

actively interacting with informants, conducting flexible data mining, and maintaining sensitivity to the research context. Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement and knowledge of the institutional transformation process, with the implementation of the research at Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic University over a period that allowed for an in-depth understanding of institutional dynamics¹³. To maintain the credibility of the findings, this study applies triangulation of sources and techniques and re-checks the meaning through comparison between data

Table 1. *Research Informant*

No	Informant Position	Interview Code	Number of Informants	Roles/Functions
1	Vice-Rector I	I1	1	Providing information related to academic policies and institutional transformation processes
2	Head of Quality Assurance Unit	I2	1	Explaining the internal quality assurance system and its implications for institutional reputation
3	Head of Public Relations	I3	1	Conveying institutional communication strategies and the construction of campus image
4	Senior Lecturer	I4	1	Providing a historical perspective on institutional changes and identity transformation
5	College Student	I5	1	Sharing perspectives on academic experiences and perceptions of the institutional image

Data analysis is carried out simultaneously from the data collection process to the conclusion-drawing stage using thematic analysis as the primary technique¹⁴. The analysis process begins with data reduction through open coding to identify relevant units of meaning; the codes are then grouped into categories and themes that represent the main patterns in the data. Furthermore, the data are presented in a thematic narrative structured to show the relationships among the themes, contexts, and experiences of the informants. At the same time, conclusions are drawn in stages, with attention paid to the consistency of the findings and the suitability of the data sources. To maintain the credibility of the analysis, data triangulation, comparison between informants, and repeated review of findings are carried out so that the resulting interpretation reflects the empirical reality in its entirety and can be accounted for academically.

C. Result

Based on a thematic analysis of interview data, field findings, and institutional documentation at Zainul Hasan University (UNZAH) Genggong, four main themes emerged that explain how the transformation of higher education contributes to improving reputation, a positive image, and public attractiveness. The four themes include: (1) transformation as the

¹³ C Andrade, "The Inconvenient Truth About Convenience and Purposive Samples," *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* 43, no. 1 (2021): 86–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0253717620977000>.

¹⁴ K A Campbell et al., "Reflexive Thematic Analysis for Applied Qualitative Health Research," *The Qualitative Report* 26, no. 6 (2021): 2011–28, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5010>.

restoration of institutional status and dignity, (2) the reputation based on cultural and religious capital of Islamic boarding schools, (3) the construction of the campus image of moderate students through public relations practices, and (4) community attraction supported by emotional and religious closeness to Islamic boarding schools. The results are presented systematically in the following subsections

1. Transformation as the Restoration of Institutional Status and Dignity

Institutional transformation is understood as the process of restoring the university's status and, by extension, its institutional dignity, rooted in its historical journey. Zainul Hasan University was founded by the late Al-'Arif Billah K.H. Hasan Saifourridzall on December 31, 1968, as a manifestation of the efforts of Islamic boarding schools to expand the role of higher education grounded in Islamic values. From the beginning, the establishment of this university was intended not only as a structural expansion, but also as an extension of the scientific mission of the pesantren in a broader social context.

During its development, UNZAH faces institutional dynamics characterized by a limited number of faculties and study programs, which means the university's formal status cannot always be maintained. This situation encourages a shift in institutional form from higher schools to institutes as an adaptive strategy to address academic capacity and higher education regulations. This series of name and status changes is interpreted by the academic community not as an indication of institutional failure, but as a process of institutional consolidation and adjustment. From the perspective of the pesantren, this dynamic is understood as an effort to sustain the institution and uphold the founder's mandate and the pesantren's dignity amid the demands of changing times.

University leaders perceive institutional transformation as a long journey rich in historical significance. The change in the university's status is interpreted as a return to the institution's original identity, which had undergone a form adjustment in line with its academic capacity. As conveyed by the university Leadership when handing over the decision to transfer status, "Alhamdulillah, after a long journey, this campus has finally returned to being a university, as it was when it was first established (I1_2020)." This is in line with the explanation of the Leadership, who attributed the transformation to the early history of the establishment, "K.H. Hasan Saifourridzall founded this university on December 31, 1968. The change in form that occurred afterwards was part of the effort to adjust the capabilities of the institution, not to abandon the original ideals of the establishment of the university (I1_2020)."

Based on the interview above, the institutional transformation of UNZAH is positioned as a restorative process that affirms historical continuity. The narrative of "returning to the

university" indicates that there is a collective memory of UNZAH's original identity that continues to be maintained, even though the institution has experienced a gradual decline and improvement in status. The change from a university to STIT in 1988, then to STAI in 1991, INZAH in 2014, and back to a university in 2020 shows that the transformation follows the logic of strengthening academic capacity, increasing the number of study programs, and enhancing institutional readiness. Thus, the restoration of university status is not interpreted as a symbolic ambition but as the result of long-term institutional work aimed at the sustainability of the institution under the auspices of the Islamic boarding school.

The historical narrative regarding the change in status and renaming of UNZAH is continuously reproduced across various official institutional forums. Through Leadership remarks and various institutional activities, the history of UNZAH's establishment, the dynamics of institutional change, and the significance of the university's restoration of status are consistently articulated as part of the strategy to strengthen the institution's identity. The emphasis on the historical journey is not only informative but also serves to strengthen the institution's dignity and build the collective understanding of the academic community towards the ongoing transformation process. In the tradition of pesantren education, this practice can be understood as an effort to transmit institutional values and memories, ensuring that structural changes remain grounded in historical awareness and the founder's mandate.

Correspondingly, references to official documents and institutional archives that explain changes in the institution's status and name serve as the basis for narrative legitimacy and are presented systematically in the research documentation section. Based on this presentation, the series of transformations in the name and institutional status of UNZAH is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Transformation of Name Change and Institutional Status of UNZAH Genggong

Institutional Name Change	Year	Reason / Cause	Proof of Documentation
Zainul Hasan University (UNZAH)	1968	Initial establishment as a university by K.H. Hasan Saifourridzall	University founding documents (foundation archives)
STIT Zainul Hasan (STIT Zaha)	1988	Not eligible for the university because it has only one faculty	Decree on change of status to STIT
STAI Zainul Hasan (STAI Zaha)	1991	Addition and strengthening of religious study programs	Decree on change of status to STAI
Zainul Hasan Institute of Islamic Sciences (INZAH)	2014	Increase in institutional status from high school to an institute	Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia
Zainul Hasan University (UNZAH) Genggong	2020	Status change back to university	KMA No. 394 of 2020

Institutional transformation is a historical process that unfolds over a long, gradual, and adaptive period. The change in the institution's name and status is not presented as a momentary decision but rather understood as a response to available academic capacity and the dynamics of higher education regulations. At the same time, the transformation is directed to maintain the dignity of the university's initial establishment under the auspices of the Islamic boarding school. In this framework, the values of pesantren serve as a normative reference that guides every structural change, ensuring it remains aligned with the institution's initial purpose.

The meaning of transformation as a process of restoring university status contributes to strengthening internal legitimacy among the academic community. This view places institutional change as part of an ongoing institutional journey, rather than as a deviation from the previous identity. These findings provide an important analytical foundation for understanding the underlying themes, especially those related to reputation building, strengthening positive image, and increasing attractiveness in the eyes of the public.

2. Reputation Based on Cultural and Religious Capital of Islamic Boarding Schools

The reputation of a university is understood as the construction of public trust resting on historically built cultural and religious capital. Such a reputation is not solely formed by formal academic indicators, such as Accreditation or rankings, but rather by social and moral legitimacy that arises from scientific traditions and consistent religious practices. Cultural capital is reflected in the continuity of educational traditions, institutional history, and alumni networks that play an active role in society. Meanwhile, religious capital is realized through the authority of the kiai, the pattern of moral development, and public trust in the religious values the institution carries. The change in institutional status extends the reach of capital into higher education, so that the institution's reputation is understood as a continuation of the long-term social trust that has been built. Thus, a college's reputation is multi-layered, integrating academic legitimacy with cultural and religious beliefs.

The reputation of a college is understood as something that existed before the university's status was transformed. Public trust in Islamic boarding schools is the primary foundation of the university's reputation. This was expressed by one of the leaders of the quality assurance institution, "Accreditation and quality standards are important, but UNZAH's reputation in the eyes of the public is highly dependent on trust in Islamic boarding schools and kiai. Our quality system is built to be in line with the mandate (I2_2024)." A similar view was conveyed by a community leader who is also a student guardian, "For the surrounding community, the name Genggong is synonymous with science and morals. When

this campus returned to being a university, it was considered natural because indeed the pesantren has been trusted for a long time (I9_2024)." The findings show that UNZAH's reputation is firmly rooted in social beliefs formed long before the university's status change. This trust grows from the historical relationship among institutions, Islamic boarding schools, and the community, so that UNZAH's reputation is not solely produced by contemporary institutional achievements but rather the result of the sustained accumulation of social and cultural legitimacy.

Departing from this description, a common thread emerges: the institution's reputation is built primarily on the cultural and religious capital of Islamic boarding schools that have earned public trust over the long term. The transformation of the university's status serves to expand and formalize the reputation it has built in higher education, without relinquishing its value base and identity as an Islamic boarding school. Within this framework, academic reputation does not stand in isolation, but rather is intertwined with cultural-religious reputations that have taken root before. The Islamic boarding school capital plays a dominant role as a source of institutional legitimacy. The strength of reputation lies in the institution's ability to integrate traditional beliefs born from the culture of pesantren with the demands of modern university governance and standards. Such integration allows institutions to maintain moral authority while enhancing academic competitiveness in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape. Building on this presentation, the configuration of reputation that relies on cultural and religious capital is summarized in Figure 1.

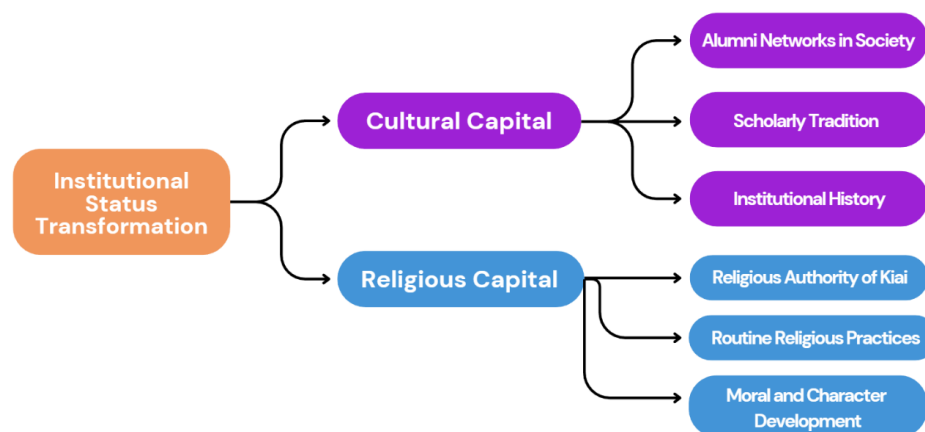


Figure 1. *Framework of Reputation Based on Cultural and Religious Capital*

3. Tagline of Institution as the Basis of Campus Image

The image of higher education is understood as a representation of the institution's identity, built and interpreted by the public through a continuous communication process. In this context, UNZAH's identity is explicitly defined by its tagline, "*Khoiru Ummah Pioneer Campus*." The tagline reflects the orientation of Islamic higher education which emphasizes the formation of academics who are scientifically superior, have independent personalities,

and have noble character with the foundation of the values of Satlogi Santri (Courtesy and Respect, Consistency and Steadfastness, Moral Guidance, God-Consciousness, Seeking Divine Pleasure, and Sincerity for the Sake of God) and the 9 Budi Utama Santri. The campus image is not a generic image tied to a specific term, but a normative image rooted in the institutional vision of the Khoiru Ummah: to produce individuals who benefit, serve as examples, and contribute to society. Public relations practice plays a strategic role in translating these values into the language of public communication, through institutional narratives, the visualization of activities, and the representation of academic and student activities. Thus, the campus image is built as a manifestation of values consciously lived and communicated.

The results of the interview show that the tagline "*Khoiru Ummah Pioneer Campus*" serves as the primary reference for the preparation and delivery of institutional communication messages. Each form of publication is understood as a representation of values that must be in harmony with the orientation of character formation and student science.

This is in line with what was expressed by the informant who manages the institution's communication, "We make the Khoiru Ummah Pioneer Campus the main reference. So every content that comes out must reflect the morals and values of the Islamic boarding school, and the science that characterizes the campus (I3_2024)." The assistant lecturer of student activities reinforced this view, "The tagline is not just a formal identity. In student activities, the values of Khoiru Ummah are always emphasized as the direction of character and behavior development (I5_2024)."

Tagline *Khoiru Ummah Pioneer Campus* articulated consistently through various institutional communication channels. This tagline is listed in the new student admission guidebook, official publication media, and narratives of academic and student activities. More than just a symbol of communication, character-building activities, routine religious practices, and the discipline of the academic community are presented as manifestations of the values inherent in the institution's identity. In campus life, the tagline is understood as a normative reference that frames academic behavior, relationships, and practices. Consistency between the message communicated and the practices carried out strengthens the public's perception of the institution's image. The image of the campus is not only built through slogans, but also through the alignment between the values narrated and the reality directly experienced by campus residents. Based on this understanding, the image construction of *Khoiru Ummah Pioneer Campus*, as reflected in the institution's tagline, is summarized and presented in Table 3, based on the analysis of the research findings.

Table 3. Form of Construction of the Pioneer Campus Image of Khoiru Ummah Based on Tagline

Tagline-Based Public Relations Practices	Image Representation
The use of the tagline Khoiru Ummah Pioneer Campus in publications	Values- and morality-oriented campus image
Narrative of student character development	The image of the Khoiru Ummah
Publication of academic and student activities	Adaptive and competitive campus image
Integration of pesantren values in public communication	The image of the continuity of tradition and higher education

These findings show that the image of *the Khoiru Ummah Pioneer Campus* is systematically constructed through public relations practices that are grounded in the institution's tagline. The tagline serves as a value framework that not only directs public communication patterns, but also frames the university's identity as a university rooted in the tradition of pesantren. In this framework, the image of the campus is not formed by descriptive terms that stand alone, but through the alignment between institutional visions, communication messages, and daily practices in academic and student activities.

4. The Attractiveness of Institutions Built through the Emotional and Religious Bonds of the Community

The appeal of institutions is not solely shaped by formal academic aspects or modern marketing strategies, but rather is strongly supported by the emotional and religious bonds that have long been built between institutions and society. The university is perceived not only as a space of higher education but also as an extension of the pesantren tradition, which has moral and spiritual legitimacy. The historical closeness to kiai figures, the sustainability of religious practices, and the role of institutions in the community's socio-religious life give this university a strong symbolic position. In this context, people's decisions to choose institutions are driven more by trust attachment (*Trust*), attachment to values, and religious beliefs rather than rational considerations based on rank or facility alone. This cultural-religious attraction serves as strategic social capital, strengthening the institution's sustainability, especially amid increasingly competitive higher education. To clarify the interrelated dimensions underlying institutional attractiveness, Figure 2.

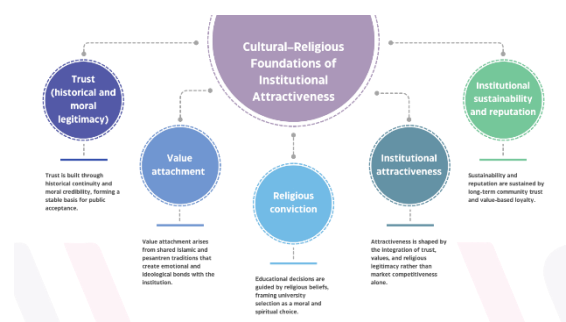


Figure 2. Cultural-Religious Foundations of Institutional Attractiveness

D. Discussion

This research shows that the transformation of higher education under the auspices of pesantren cannot be reduced solely to administrative or structural changes. This transformation is better understood as a process of reinterpreting institutional identity, rooted in institutional history, religious values, and long-standing social beliefs. The change in institutional status is perceived as an effort to restore the institution's dignity, which, on the one hand, strengthens the internal legitimacy of the academic community and, on the other hand, increases external acceptance within the community. In this context, the institution's reputation is built primarily through the cultural and religious capital of the pesantren. At the same time, its public image is constructed through an institutional narrative consistent with Islamic and boarding school values. The public's attraction to Islamic universities based on pesantren is not only driven by academic considerations, but also by the emotional, religious, and historical proximity between the institution and the surrounding social community. Overall, these findings confirm that the main strength of the transformation of Islamic university-based on pesantren lies in their ability to integrate institutional change with firmly entrenched local traditions, thus giving birth to a distinctive and contextual model of institutional development.

The findings of this study enrich the literature on the transformation of Islamic universities by emphasizing that the reputation and image of institutions do not rely solely on quantitative indicators. Where this is like ranking and Accreditation, but also in the cultural and religious dimensions that live in the local context¹⁵. This result aligns with a view that emphasizes the roles of symbolic capital and social trust in building the legitimacy of educational organizations¹⁶. However, in contrast to studies that position university modernization as a rational-technocratic process, the findings of this study show that the process of Sensemaking Institutional actors play an important role in interpreting change as a continuation of tradition, not as a break from the past¹⁷. Thus, this study fills a gap in the literature by examining how Islamic universities based on pesantren manage the tension between the demands of modernization and the preservation of traditional values. In addition, these findings broaden our understanding of the formation of institutional legitimacy through the interaction among history, religious Leadership, and institutional communication strategies.

¹⁵ Anazel P. Gamilla and Thelma D. Palaoag, "Building A Barrier: A Security Operations Center Framework For A Sustainable Smart Campus Network," *6th International Conference on Information Technology, InCIT 2022*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1109/InCIT56086.2022.10067377>.

¹⁶ G Diver, "Emotional Challenges and Pre-Placement Preparations," *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 11, no. 2 (2021): 386–405, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-03-2019-0038>.

¹⁷ P A Asadourian et al., "Home Field Advantage: Assessing the Geographic Trends of the Plastic Surgery Residency Match During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Surgical Education* 78, no. 6 (2021): 1923–29, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsurg.2021.06.002>.

In the realm of Islamic education management, this research makes an important contribution, particularly regarding the management of pesantren-based universities. The findings show that effective change management depends not only on strategic planning and regulatory compliance, but also on institutional leaders' ability to manage the meaning, values, and symbols that shape the organization. This perspective emphasizes that integrating modern managerial principles with Islamic values and Islamic boarding schools is a source of legitimacy and institutional competitiveness. By offering a contextual cultural-religious approach, this study enriches the discourse of Islamic education management. It shows that the management of the reputation and image of Islamic universities does not have to rely on imitation of Western management models.

Building on these findings, this discussion emphasizes that the transformation of Islamic universities based on pesantren is a complex and meaningful social process that involves dynamic interactions among institutional structures, actors, and traditional values. The success of transformation is highly determined by the institution's ability to maintain identity continuity while responding to the demands of change. The broader implications of this study are the need for an approach to managing Islamic universities that treats tradition, religious Leadership, and community trust as strategic assets. For further research, these findings open up opportunities for comparative studies of other Islamic universities, as well as for deepening the understanding of the roles of Leadership and institutional communication in building public reputation and appeal. Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of theories but also provides practical implications for Islamic education management policies and practices.

E. Conclusion

This study examined how institutional transformation in Islamic higher education contributes to strengthening reputation, building a positive public image, and enhancing community engagement within an increasingly competitive academic environment. Rather than conceptualizing transformation as a merely structural or regulatory shift, the analysis emphasized how change is socially constructed, interpreted, and legitimized by institutional actors and surrounding communities in a pesantren-based university context. The findings indicate that transformation is most effective when it is anchored in historical continuity and shared religious values, where changes in institutional status are perceived as a reaffirmation of institutional dignity that consolidates internal cohesion and reinforces external trust. Reputation is shown to derive less from quantitative performance indicators and more from the accumulation of cultural and religious capital rooted in pesantren traditions. At the same time, public image is shaped through consistent institutional narratives that align academic advancement with moral and religious commitments.

The broader implications of these findings highlight the strategic importance of integrating managerial reforms with cultural and religious legitimacy in Islamic higher education governance. Institutional leaders and policymakers are encouraged to recognize local traditions and value systems as assets that can strengthen institutional credibility and social relevance rather than as constraints on modernization. By situating transformation within culturally embedded frameworks, Islamic higher education institutions can pursue competitiveness without eroding their normative foundations. These conclusions also point to the need for future research to extend this inquiry through comparative analyses across different institutional contexts and by examining how Leadership practices and communication strategies mediate the long-term sustainability of institutional change

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