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DOES RELIGIOUS PROXIMITY MATTER? UNIVERSITY BRAND AWARENESS AMONG MADRASAH ALIYAH STUDENTS IN SEMARANG

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ABSTRAK

Persaingan yang semakin ketat antarperguruan tinggi menjadikan branding universitas sebagai salah satu aspek strategis dalam menarik perhatian calon mahasiswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dan membandingkan tingkat brand awareness Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Walisongo, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), dan Universitas Diponegoro (UNDIP) pada siswa Madrasah Aliyah di Kota Semarang. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif komparatif dengan melibatkan 231 siswa kelas XII dari 18 Madrasah Aliyah yang dipilih melalui teknik proportional simple random sampling. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan kuesioner terstruktur yang mengukur lima dimensi brand awareness, yaitu brand recall, brand recognition, top-of-mind awareness, brand confidence, dan brand familiarity. Data dianalisis menggunakan One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), kemudian dilanjutkan dengan uji post-hoc Least Significant Difference (LSD). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya perbedaan yang signifikan pada tingkat brand awareness ketiga universitas ($F = 125{,}219$; $p < 0{,}001$). Hasil perbandingan antar kelompok menunjukkan bahwa UNDIP memiliki tingkat brand awareness tertinggi, disusul UNNES, sedangkan UIN Walisongo berada pada tingkat terendah. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa kedekatan agama dan latar belakang pendidikan tidak secara otomatis menghasilkan brand awareness yang lebih kuat terhadap perguruan tinggi Islam di kalangan siswa Madrasah Aliyah. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya perguruan tinggi Islam, khususnya PTKIN, untuk memperkuat positioning institusi melalui branding yang konsisten, komunikasi digital yang terintegrasi, diferensiasi akademik yang lebih jelas, serta keterlibatan berkelanjutan dengan calon mahasiswa. Penelitian selanjutnya dapat menguji reputasi institusi, keterlibatan digital, brand trust, word of mouth, dan persepsi kualitas akademik sebagai faktor yang berpotensi memengaruhi brand awareness perguruan tinggi.

Kata Kunci: *Brand awareness*, Generasi Z, *Madrasah Aliyah*, pemasaran pendidikan tinggi, pendidikan tinggi Islam, *university branding*.

ABSTRACT

Increasing competition among higher education institutions has made university branding an important strategic consideration in attracting prospective students. This study aims to analyze and compare the level of brand awareness of Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Walisongo, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), and Universitas Diponegoro (UNDIP) among Madrasah Aliyah students in Semarang City. A quantitative comparative approach was employed involving 231 Grade 12 students from 18 Madrasah Aliyah institutions selected through proportional simple random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measuring five dimensions of brand awareness, namely brand recall, brand recognition, top-of-mind awareness, brand confidence, and brand familiarity. Data analysis was conducted using One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), followed by the Least Significant

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Difference (LSD) post-hoc test. The results reveal significant differences in brand awareness among the three universities ($F = 125.219$, $p < 0.001$). The pairwise comparison shows that UNDIP has the highest level of brand awareness, followed by UNNES, while UIN Walisongo records the lowest level. These findings indicate that religious and educational proximity does not automatically generate stronger brand awareness toward an Islamic higher education institution among Madrasah Aliyah students. The study highlights the need for Islamic higher education institutions, particularly PTKIN, to strengthen institutional positioning through consistent branding, integrated digital communication, clearer academic differentiation, and sustained engagement with prospective students. Future studies should examine factors such as institutional reputation, digital engagement, brand trust, word of mouth, and perceived academic quality as potential determinants of university brand awareness.
Keywords: Brand awareness, Generation Z, higher education marketing, Islamic higher education, Madrasah Aliyah students, university branding.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has increasingly developed into a competitive sector in which universities must differentiate themselves not only through academic programmes and educational facilities but also through institutional identity, reputation, visibility, and brand strength (Liu & Ghasemy, 2025; Nguyen Thi et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2023). The intensification of competition has positioned university branding as a strategic institutional resource because prospective students increasingly evaluate universities through both functional attributes and accumulated perceptions of institutional credibility and distinctiveness (Huyen et al., 2024; Mateus et al., 2024; Qazi & Al-Mhdawi, 2025). Contemporary studies therefore conceptualize university brands as multidimensional assets formed through academic quality, institutional reputation, communication activities, stakeholder experiences, and recognizable institutional characteristics (Huyen et al., 2024; Nguyen Thi et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2023). Within such an environment, universities that maintain stronger reputational signals and more recognizable identities may achieve greater cognitive visibility among prospective students before more detailed comparisons of academic programmes, costs, or other educational attributes occur (Liu & Ghasemy, 2025; Mateus et al., 2024; Qazi & Al-Mhdawi, 2025).

One important dimension of university brand equity is brand awareness, which reflects the extent to which prospective students can recognize or recall a university when considering available higher education alternatives (Bohara et al., 2024; Juhaidi, Fitria, et al., 2025a; Sudhana et al., 2023). Brand awareness is particularly relevant during the pre-enrolment stage because an institution must first become cognitively available before prospective students can evaluate its image, programmes, reputation, or perceived suitability (Fakhrudin et al., 2024). Nevertheless, recent evidence demonstrates that the relationship between awareness and behavioural intention is not necessarily linear because awareness can operate together with brand congruity, brand attitude, trust, and other evaluative mechanisms (Macías et al., 2023). Evidence from Islamic higher education in Indonesia indicates that brand awareness significantly influences enrolment intention and brand trust, whereas research from other higher education contexts shows that students may prioritize programme-related and institutional choice determinants when making high-involvement decisions (Juhaidi, Al-Ansi, et al., 2025). These findings indicate that brand awareness remains an important construct, but its role must be examined within a specific institutional, geographical, and student context.

Prospective students' selection of a university is consequently shaped by multiple factors rather than by institutional familiarity alone. Recent studies identify university

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reputation, academic quality, programme attractiveness, perceived value, institutional image, and career prospects as important considerations in higher education choice (Huyen et al., 2024; Juhaidi, 2024). Reputation plays a particularly important role because prospective students generally possess limited direct experience of the universities they are considering and therefore depend on institutional signals to reduce uncertainty regarding educational quality and future outcomes. Institutional image also contributes to enrolment-related evaluations because students interpret academic performance, programme-level characteristics, and institutional attributes as part of the overall university brand (Fakhrudin et al., 2024; Mateus et al., 2024). However, the importance of these attributes presupposes that the institution is already sufficiently recognizable to be considered as a realistic educational alternative, which reinforces the theoretical importance of examining brand awareness during the pre-enrolment stage.

The dynamics of university branding become more complex in Islamic higher education because institutions must simultaneously communicate academic credibility and a distinctive religious identity (R. Ambarwati & Sari, 2023; Fadhli et al., 2023; Rachman et al., 2025). Islamic branding can contribute to university differentiation when religious values are consistently reflected in institutional identity, educational experiences, communication practices, and stakeholder relationships (Soimah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that religious identity alone does not determine students' university choices because programme availability, accreditation, perceived academic quality, reputation, and career relevance remain important considerations in the competition between Islamic and general higher education institutions (Juhaidi, 2024; Soimah et al., 2024). Furthermore, brand trust and institutional commitment strengthen students' relationships with Islamic higher education institutions, suggesting that religious positioning must be supported by credible and consistent institutional performance. Islamic higher education institutions therefore operate within a dual competitive framework in which religious distinctiveness and conventional university brand attributes jointly influence institutional attractiveness.

This competitive situation is particularly relevant among Madrasah Aliyah students because their educational background may shape how they perceive the identity and positioning of Islamic higher education institutions. Evidence from State Madrasah Aliyah students shows that PTKIN is often perceived primarily as an institution associated with Islamic studies, indicating that previous educational experiences can influence how students interpret the identity and academic orientation of Islamic universities (Sulkifli et al., 2025). Nevertheless, religious proximity should not be assumed to automatically generate stronger preferences for Islamic higher education. Recent evidence among Generation Z prospective students indicates that religiosity does not significantly determine their intention to choose Islamic higher education, whereas attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control have more substantial effects on enrolment intention (Agustiningsih et al., 2026). From an institutional perspective, the integration of academic excellence, religious values, institutional identity, and consistent brand positioning can strengthen public perceptions and increase the attractiveness of Islamic educational institutions (Badarwan et al., 2026). Communication exposure is also relevant because publication strategies associated with SPAN-UM PTKIN have been found to influence the brand awareness of Islamic higher education institutions among incoming students (Priatna & Khana, 2025). These findings indicate that Madrasah Aliyah students may develop different levels of awareness toward UIN Walisongo, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), and Universitas Diponegoro (UNDIP) through a combination of educational background, institutional identity, academic positioning, and communication exposure. Therefore, the relative brand awareness of the three universities among Madrasah Aliyah

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students needs to be established empirically rather than inferred solely from their religious educational background.

The formation of university brand awareness has also changed considerably with the increasing role of digital communication and social media in higher education marketing. Prospective students now obtain information about universities from multiple online sources, including official institutional accounts, user-generated content, social networks, and digital communities (Pawar, 2024; Perera et al., 2023). These digital interactions allow universities to increase institutional exposure while simultaneously building engagement and reinforcing brand-related perceptions among prospective students (Tang et al., 2025). Social media and content marketing have also been shown to influence university choice by strengthening brand image, institutional attractiveness, and students' familiarity with particular campuses (Dwivedi, 2024; Nofrizal et al., 2024). However, effective digital communication depends not only on posting frequency but also on the relevance, quality, and interactivity of the content delivered to audiences (Vo et al., 2024). This indicates that digital communication has become an important mechanism through which universities maintain visibility and remain cognitively accessible during prospective students' decision-making processes.

Digital competition has become even more important as higher education institutions increasingly operate within an attention economy in which visibility, reputation, and communication intensity determine how frequently institutional brands are encountered by prospective students. Digital media visibility can contribute to university brand positioning by increasing the frequency with which an institution appears in broader information networks (Li et al., 2025; Petersen, 2025). At the same time, social media communication can strengthen brand preference when prospective students perceive institutional content as transparent, interactive, and relevant to their educational expectations (Isaacs & Mulder, 2025). The circulation of university-related information is also amplified through electronic word of mouth, where students and other stakeholders share experiences, opinions, and evaluations that can strengthen or weaken institutional perceptions (O'Brien Cáceres & Arana Barbier, 2025). Recent research further shows that the design and communication style of university social media content can influence student acquisition, especially when messages emphasize interaction quality and provide meaningful information about the institution (Tran et al., 2026). Therefore, university brand awareness in the digital era is formed through the interaction of institutional communication, repeated exposure, peer-generated information, reputational signals, and broader online visibility rather than through formal promotional activities alone.

Despite the growing body of research on university branding, several empirical gaps remain. Previous studies have extensively discussed university brand image, reputation, digital marketing, student engagement, and enrolment intention, while direct comparative studies focusing specifically on brand awareness across different types of universities remain relatively limited (Liu & Ghasemy, 2025; Xiao et al., 2023). Research on online marketing and higher education brand awareness also indicates that the relationship between institutional visibility, brand awareness, and student enrolment has not yet been fully explained across different institutional and market settings (Bohara et al., 2024). In the context of Islamic higher education, existing studies have primarily examined Islamic branding, institutional reputation, university choice, marketing strategies, brand trust, and enrolment intention (D. Ambarwati & Abroza, 2024; Juhaidi, Fitria, et al., 2025a). Comparative evidence between Islamic and general higher education has likewise focused more on factors influencing university choice than on differences in brand awareness among prospective students from the same educational background. Meanwhile, digital marketing studies have established the importance of social

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media exposure and institutional visibility but have provided limited evidence regarding whether such exposure results in different levels of brand awareness among geographically proximate universities with distinct institutional identities. Accordingly, an empirical gap remains concerning the comparative level of brand awareness of UIN Walisongo, UNNES, and UNDIP among Grade 12 Madrasah Aliyah students in Semarang City.

The novelty of this study lies in its direct comparison of brand awareness across three geographically proximate public universities that represent different institutional identities, namely UIN Walisongo as an Islamic state university and UNNES and UNDIP as general public universities. Unlike previous studies that predominantly examine the antecedents or consequences of university branding, this study places brand awareness itself as the primary comparative construct at the pre-enrolment stage. The study also introduces an institutionally heterogeneous comparison within a relatively homogeneous religious secondary-education population. This design enables the study to determine whether religious and educational proximity produces stronger cognitive salience toward an Islamic university or whether general public universities maintain stronger brand awareness despite differences in institutional identity.

Accordingly, this study aims to measure and compare the level of brand awareness of UIN Walisongo, UNNES, and UNDIP among Grade 12 Madrasah Aliyah students in Semarang City and to determine whether statistically significant differences exist among the three university brands. The findings are expected to contribute to higher education branding literature by providing comparative evidence concerning brand awareness at the pre-enrolment stage and to offer practical implications for university administrators, particularly Islamic higher education managers, in strengthening institutional positioning and communication strategies within an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative-comparative approach within a positivistic paradigm to objectively measure brand awareness across three higher education institutions: UIN Walisongo (X1), UNNES (X2), and UNDIP (X3). The research isolates brand perceptions within the cognitive structures of respondents to evaluate significant differences among these categorical independent variables. Brand Awareness is operationalized in this study through five indicators: *Brand Recall, Brand Recognition, Top of Mind Awareness (TOMA), Brand Confidence,* and *Brand Familiarity*. The use of *Brand Recall, Brand Recognition,* and *Top of Mind Awareness* is directly supported by recent higher education branding research that treats these constructs as specific subfactors of brand awareness (Bhebe et al., 2026), while *Brand Familiarity* reflects the extent of awareness and memory-based familiarity with a brand (Raffaelli et al., 2024). More broadly, recent systematic evidence confirms that aided and unaided awareness remain central approaches for measuring brand awareness (López-Rodríguez et al., 2024). *Brand Confidence* is incorporated as an evaluative indicator reflecting respondents' certainty toward their brand-related knowledge, consistent with contemporary evidence that confidence influences how consumers translate accumulated knowledge and experience into judgments and choices (Rocklage et al., 2025). The target population consists of 546 12th-grade students from 18 Madrasah Aliyah (MA) institutions in Semarang City. A proportional simple random sampling technique was employed, and Slovin's Formula with a 5% margin of error ($\alpha = 0.05$) produced a minimum required sample of 231 respondents, consistent with recent methodological discussion of Slovin's formula for finite populations under simple random sampling (Majdina et al., 2024).

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Data collection was conducted using a 15-item questionnaire measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Prior to primary distribution, pilot testing was conducted to evaluate the quality of the instrument. Pearson Product-Moment correlation produced item-validity coefficients ranging from 0.396 to 0.799, all exceeding the r-table threshold of 0.129, while Cronbach's Alpha reached 0.873, indicating strong internal consistency. The use of item-total Pearson correlation and Cronbach's Alpha for evaluating validity and reliability in pilot-tested Likert-type instruments is supported by recent methodological evidence (Khanal & Chhetri, 2024), while contemporary measurement guidelines emphasize the importance of establishing reliability and validity before using multi-item scales for inferential analysis (Cheung et al., 2023). Statistical processing was performed using SPSS and began with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test and Levene's Test for homogeneity. After the parametric assumptions were satisfied, One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test mean differences among the three university groups (Chatzi & Doody, 2023). When the omnibus ANOVA yielded a statistically significant result ($p < 0.05$), the Least Significant Difference (LSD) post-hoc procedure was applied to identify specific pairwise differences, with recent methodological research emphasizing that the choice of post-hoc procedure should follow a significant ANOVA and consider variance homogeneity and group-size conditions (Juarros-Basterretxea et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Before conducting inferential analyses, the 15-item measurement instrument was evaluated for item validity and internal consistency. Item validity was examined using Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficients by correlating individual item scores with the total construct score. The psychometric evaluation confirmed that all 15 operational items satisfied the empirical criteria required for parametric testing. The statistical parameters regarding the validity testing of the brand awareness scale are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Validity Test of the Brand Awareness Instrument

Dimension	Item Code	Pearson Correlation (r)	r-table Threshold	Statistical Inference
Brand Recall	item1	0.467	0.129	Valid
	item2	0.634	0.129	Valid
	item3	0.692	0.129	Valid
Brand Recognition	item4	0.508	0.129	Valid
	item5	0.685	0.129	Valid
	item6	0.739	0.129	Valid
Top of Mind Awareness	item7	0.396	0.129	Valid
	item8	0.799	0.129	Valid
	item9	0.776	0.129	Valid
Brand Confidence	item10	0.689	0.129	Valid
	item11	0.636	0.129	Valid
	item12	0.619	0.129	Valid
Brand Familiarity	item13	0.618	0.129	Valid
	item14	0.779	0.129	Valid
	item15	0.718	0.129	Valid

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The correlation values reported in Table 1 confirm that all 15 questionnaire items attained positive coefficients substantially higher than the critical r-table threshold of 0.129. The lowest coefficient observed in Table 1 is item 7 ($r = 0.396$), whereas the highest correlation is demonstrated by item 8 ($r = 0.799$). These empirical metrics confirm that every item reliably represents its designated operational dimension of university brand awareness. Consequently, all items in Table 1 were retained for subsequent comparative testing.

Following the validity verification, the internal consistency of the overall instrument was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha. Reliability testing guarantees that the questionnaire yields stable and dependable measurements across the surveyed student cohort. The analysis produced an overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient that substantially exceeded standard psychometric benchmarks. The summary of the instrument reliability testing is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability Test of the Brand Awareness Instrument

Scale Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items	Reliability Evaluation
University Brand Awareness Scale	0.873	15	Highly Reliable

As illustrated in Table 2, the overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient reached 0.873 across the 15 measured questionnaire items. This metric comfortably surpasses the conventional reliability threshold of 0.70 and falls into the highly reliable bracket of 0.80–0.89. The outcome in Table 2 confirms that the instrument possesses excellent internal consistency without item redundancy. Therefore, the measurement scale was deemed suitable for evaluating and comparing university brand awareness.

The validated questionnaire was completed by 231 Grade 12 *Madrasah Aliyah* students across Semarang City. Gathering demographic background data is essential for interpreting the social context of Generation Z students preparing for tertiary education. The respondent profile reflects diverse educational backgrounds across public and private Islamic secondary schools. A breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the participants is detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic Profile of Respondents ($N = 231$)

Demographic Attribute	Classification Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	177	76.6
	Male	54	23.4
Age	16 Years Old	77	33.3
	17 Years Old	100	43.3
	Older than 17 Years	54	23.4
Origin School (Top 5)	MA Daarul Ulum Semarang	39	16.9
	MAN 1 Semarang	37	16.0
	MA Al Khoiriyyah	19	8.2
	MAN 2 Semarang	19	8.2
	MA NU Nurul Huda	14	6.0
	Other Madrasah Aliyah	105	45.5

The demographic configuration in Table 3 demonstrates an evident female majority, accounting for 76.6% of the surveyed cohort. Age distribution in Table 3 shows a primary concentration at 17 years old (43.3%) and 16 years old (33.3%), corresponding with the standard age of high school graduation in Indonesia. Furthermore, Table 3 indicates a balanced geographic distribution across both state (*Madrasah Aliyah Negeri*) and private Islamic

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institutions. This broad demographic distribution confirms that the sample adequately represents the socio-educational profile of prospective university applicants in Semarang City.

Prior to conducting parametric hypothesis testing, the gathered dataset was examined to confirm the assumptions of normality and variance homogeneity. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed to verify normal distribution across the three institutional data groups, while Levene's test was applied to assess homogeneity of variances based on the mean. Meeting these statistical prerequisites is mandatory to ensure the mathematical validity of the subsequent ANOVA test. The statistical results of the assumption testing are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Parametric Assumption Tests for Brand Awareness Data

Assumption Test	Evaluated University / Parameter	Significance Value (p)	Test Conclusion
Normality	Kolmogorov-Smirnov (UIN Walisongo)	0.087	Normal Distribution
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov (UNNES)	0.134	Normal Distribution
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov (UNDIP)	0.178	Normal Distribution
Homogeneity	Levene's Test (Based on Mean)	0.221	Homogeneous Variances

The statistical metrics detailed in Table 4 confirm that the data distribution satisfies the requirements for parametric analysis. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov significance values for UIN Walisongo ($p = 0.087$), UNNES ($p = 0.134$), and UNDIP ($p = 0.178$) all comfortably exceed the 0.05 threshold. Furthermore, Levene's test statistic of 1.447 yielded a significance level of $p = 0.221$, confirming homoscedasticity across groups. With both parametric assumptions confirmed in Table 4, One-Way ANOVA was appropriately deployed to examine institutional differences.

The primary hypothesis regarding variations in university brand awareness was examined through One-Way Analysis of Variance. The test evaluated whether variance between university categories exceeded random error within respondent groups. Computing the ratio of between-group variance to within-group variance allows for a formal statistical decision regarding the null hypothesis. The complete ANOVA summary decomposition is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Across Universities

Variance Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square	F-Statistic	Significance (p)
Between Groups	45738.799	2	22869.399	125.219	0.000
Within Groups	126017.854	690	182.635	-	-
Total	171756.653	692	-	-	-

The variance decomposition summarized in Table 5 reveals an F-statistic of 125.219 with an asymptotic significance level of $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.001$). Because the probability value in Table 5 is substantially lower than $\alpha = 0.05$, the null hypothesis (H_0) is definitively rejected. This outcome proves that cognitive awareness among *Madrasah Aliyah* students differs significantly across the three public universities. The high F-value in Table 5 indicates that institutional identity accounts for substantial variation in student brand perceptions.

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Because the omnibus ANOVA confirmed significant institutional differences, pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Least Significant Difference (LSD) post-hoc test. This post-hoc procedure isolates the magnitude and direction of differences between each pair of universities. Computing pairwise comparisons clarifies the empirical hierarchy of brand awareness across the three institutions. The results of the post-hoc LSD analysis are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Post-Hoc Least Significant Difference (LSD) Test for Brand Awareness

Institutional Comparison (I vs. J)	Mean Difference (I – J)	Standard Error	Significance Value (p)	95% Confidence Interval
UNDIP vs. UIN Walisongo	19.306*	1.257	0.000	[16.837, 21.775]
UNDIP vs. UNNES	13.831*	1.257	0.000	[11.362, 16.300]
UNNES vs. UIN Walisongo	5.475*	1.257	0.000	[3.006, 7.944]

**The mean difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.*

The pairwise comparisons documented in Table 6 identify a distinct cognitive hierarchy among the evaluated institutions. UNDIP demonstrates a significant advantage over UIN Walisongo, with a mean difference of 19.306 points ($p = 0.000$). When compared with UNNES, UNDIP maintains a statistically significant lead of 13.831 points ($p = 0.000$). Finally, Table 6 indicates that UNNES exceeds UIN Walisongo by 5.475 points ($p = 0.000$). These post-hoc results establish that UNDIP occupies the strongest brand awareness position, followed by UNNES, while UIN Walisongo records the lowest cognitive awareness among *Madrasah Aliyah* students in Semarang City.

Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate significant differences in brand awareness among Universitas Diponegoro (UNDIP), Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), and Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Walisongo among Grade 12 *Madrasah Aliyah* students in Semarang City. The One-Way ANOVA produced an F-value of 125.219 with $p < 0.001$, confirming that the three institutions do not occupy equivalent positions in respondents' cognitive awareness. The post-hoc LSD analysis shows that all pairwise differences are statistically significant, establishing a hierarchy where UNDIP leads, followed by UNNES, while UIN Walisongo records the lowest awareness score. These outcomes show that brand awareness among secondary students is stratified rather than uniformly distributed across local institutions.

The magnitude of these differences confirms that university brand awareness reflects more than simple name recognition among prospective students. In tertiary education, brand awareness represents cognitive accessibility when students recall and compare higher education alternatives during their application journeys. A systematic review by Xiao et al. (2023) demonstrates that university brands are multidimensional constructs shaped by institutional reputation, communication, stakeholder experiences, and differentiation. Accordingly, the present findings show that the three public universities possess distinct levels of cognitive salience within the prospective student cohort. The stronger position of UNDIP indicates that its institutional brand is more readily accessible in student memory, serving as a cognitive anchor before students evaluate specific academic programs (Xiao et al., 2023).

The superior brand awareness of UNDIP can be understood through institutional reputation and accumulated market signals. Prospective students typically possess limited direct experience with universities prior to application and depend on signals that reduce uncertainty

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regarding educational quality. Indicators such as national rankings, institutional accreditation, research performance, graduate employability, and public visibility shape these perceptions. Recent literature shows that universities build brand equity by pairing institutional prestige with deliberate communication strategies that maintain visibility (Nofrizal et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2026). Therefore, UNDIP's dominant awareness score reflects an accumulated institutional reputation rather than the effect of an isolated promotional campaign.

This distinction is important because the present study measured institutional variations in brand awareness rather than testing the causal impact of rankings, alumni networks, or marketing expenditures. Consequently, these institutional attributes should be interpreted as theoretically plausible explanatory mechanisms rather than verified causal drivers. Recent literature supports this cautious interpretation by showing that brand awareness operates as a mediating mechanism through which promotion, facilities, and academic prospects shape choices (Kharisma & Haryono, 2024). This suggests that institutional awareness emerges from multiple interacting cues over an extended period. The higher awareness of UNDIP may reflect a cumulative process in which diverse signals reinforce the university's presence in students' minds.

The second notable finding is the significant awareness gap between UNDIP and UNNES, despite both operating as major state universities within the same urban market. UNDIP maintains a 13.831-point advantage over UNNES, demonstrating that public university status does not automatically produce identical cognitive awareness. Universities compete for student attention through institutional differentiation, historical reputation, and communication outreach. Studies highlight that content marketing and digital engagement reinforce brand equity by making campus achievements salient to prospective applicants (Nofrizal et al., 2024; Tengku Mahamad et al., 2024). Thus, the difference between UNDIP and UNNES reflects unequal visibility and cognitive memorability within this *Madrasah Aliyah* student segment.

The findings concerning UIN Walisongo provide meaningful empirical evidence regarding the limits of religious affiliation in higher education marketing. At first glance, shared Islamic educational values might be presumed to generate greater affinity toward an Islamic state university. However, the empirical findings reveal the opposite pattern, as UIN Walisongo recorded the lowest awareness score, trailing both general public universities. This result demonstrates that shared religious background does not automatically yield stronger brand salience for an Islamic higher education institution. This finding aligns with Juhaidi, Fitria, et al. (2025a), who observed that secondary school type exerts a negligible effect on enrolment intention toward Islamic universities, proving that attending an Islamic high school does not guarantee stronger cognitive affinity for Islamic tertiary education.

These findings also reflect the multidimensional nature of student decision-making in contemporary higher education. Juhaidi (2024) demonstrated that students evaluate diverse institutional characteristics, academic prospects, and career relevance rather than relying strictly on religious categories when choosing a university. While religious compatibility remains an appealing feature, it competes directly with academic reputation, program diversity, campus infrastructure, and perceived career mobility. As a result, UIN Walisongo competes not only within the Islamic higher education sphere but also within a broader consideration set that includes major general public universities (Juhaidi, 2024).

From an institutional positioning perspective, these findings imply that religious identity should serve as an integrated point of differentiation rather than the sole promotional anchor. Islamic higher education institutions face the dual responsibility of preserving Islamic intellectual heritage while demonstrating conventional academic competitiveness. Effective

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reputation management in Islamic tertiary education requires balanced positioning that merges institutional values with tangible educational excellence (Arsyadana & Indrioko, 2025; Rachman et al., 2025). UIN Walisongo's lower awareness score does not necessarily denote inferior educational quality, but suggests that its comprehensive academic value proposition is less salient among prospective students than those of UNDIP and UNNES.

This strategic challenge is heightened in the digital environment, where prospective students interact with university brands across multiple social channels. Although Indonesian Islamic universities have adopted social media as a primary promotional medium, digital engagement performance often remains uneven across campaigns (Juhaidi, 2024). Digital presence alone does not generate strong brand awareness unless institutions maintain message consistency, interactive engagement, and targeted communication. A university may publish regular promotional posts but still fail to establish strong brand recall if its content does not highlight distinctive academic associations (Khodijah et al., 2024).

The role of digital media must also be evaluated based on communication quality rather than vanity metrics such as follower counts. Higher education marketing research reveals that social media content emphasizing interactive institutional experiences yields stronger student engagement than superficial promotional announcements (Tran et al., 2026). Word-of-mouth and peer recommendations represent another influential mechanism through which university awareness develops. Conversations involving current undergraduates, alumni, high school teachers, and families shape institutional image and student trust (Arief & Brabo, 2025; Eschenbacher, 2025; Lin et al., 2025). Repeated positive exposure across social and community networks solidifies an institution's presence in prospective students' memory.

The strategic relevance of these findings is underscored by the established link between early brand awareness and subsequent application behavior. Although this study examined awareness rather than final matriculation, prior research confirms that brand awareness directly drives enrolment intention and fosters brand trust (Juhaidi, Fitria, et al., 2025a). UIN Walisongo's lower awareness position among *Madrasah Aliyah* students represents an upstream recruitment hurdle within a key demographic segment. If low awareness persists, the institution risks exclusion from students' initial consideration sets before detailed comparisons of curricula or scholarships take place.

Consequently, UIN Walisongo must reconsider how its Islamic identity is integrated with contemporary academic offerings. Religious values remain a valuable differentiator, but prospective students must also associate the campus with modern science, professional disciplines, and competitive career opportunities (Arsyadana & Indrioko, 2025). The awareness gap between UNNES and UIN Walisongo reinforces the reality that geographical proximity alone does not ensure cognitive accessibility. Sustainable institutional branding requires continuous communication rather than sporadic campaigns limited to annual student recruitment windows (Juhaidi, Fitria, et al., 2025a). Furthermore, *Madrasah Aliyah* students should not be assumed to be a captive audience for Islamic higher education, underscoring the need for empirical market analysis to inform institutional positioning.

CONCLUSION

This quantitative comparative study demonstrates statistically significant differences in brand awareness among Universitas Diponegoro (UNDIP), Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), and Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Walisongo among Grade 12 *Madrasah Aliyah* students in Semarang City. The One-Way ANOVA ($F = 125.219; p < 0.001$) and post-hoc LSD analyses confirm a clear cognitive hierarchy: UNDIP commands the highest brand

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awareness, followed by UNNES in the intermediate position, while UIN Walisongo records the lowest awareness level across all measured pairwise comparisons. These findings establish that religious and educational proximity does not automatically translate into superior cognitive awareness toward an Islamic higher education institution among Islamic secondary school students. Instead, prospective candidates evaluate higher education alternatives within a broad competitive consideration set where general and Islamic universities compete for institutional visibility.

These findings suggest that Islamic higher education institutions, particularly PTKIN, should move beyond assumption-based segmentation and strengthen their institutional positioning through sustainable, long-term branding strategies. University leadership at UIN Walisongo should communicate their Islamic mission alongside their academic strengths, professional degree offerings, modern facilities, and graduate career trajectories. Digital marketing initiatives must focus on interactive, high-quality content and alumni engagement rather than seasonal promotional broadcasts. Because this study examined differences in brand awareness using cross-sectional data, institutional reputation, digital outreach quality, word-of-mouth, and perceived academic quality were explored as theoretical explanations rather than verified causal determinants. Future research should employ structural equation modeling or longitudinal designs to empirically test these organizational and communication factors as predictors of university brand awareness across diverse student demographics.

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