

Promotion strategy of Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta (UMY) in 2024-2025 in facing competition with State Universities with Legal Entity Status (PTN-BH)

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Abstract

This research examines how Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) develops a promotional strategy to compete with State Universities with Legal Entity Status (PTN-BH) in 2024-2025. This topic comes from the recent policy that PTN-BH (Universities with Legal Entity Status) have greater advantages, including greater autonomy, substantial financial support, and a public perception that generally ranks PTN as the preferred option over Private Universities (PTS). Because of this, private universities like UMY need to devise specific strategies to promote themselves to stay competitive. This study utilizes promotion theory as a framework to analyze UMY's management of its promotional mix. The selected methodology is a descriptive, qualitative approach that employs data collection through semi-structured interviews and documentation. The Sub-Directorate of Public Relations and Media, the Sub-Directorate of Branding and Marketing, and the Sub-Directorate of UMY Admissions are all involved in this initiative. It provides a comprehensive view of the strategy from various perspectives. The research indicates that UMY employs two distinct promotional approaches: soft selling and hard selling. In soft-selling, UMY attempts to enhance its image by highlighting its successes, showcasing innovative ideas from faculty and students, and ensuring that its social media and website content is of the highest quality. Hard selling is done more directly, such as by visiting schools and disseminating persuasive digital content across various platforms. In general, these two strategies work together to help UMY stay competitive and even improve as an excellent private university, especially as PTN-BH becomes more competitive.

Keywords

Promotional strategies, Higher education, Soft-selling, Hard-selling, UMY

Introduction

Changes in higher education policy in Indonesia over the past few years have created new dynamics in the competition among higher education institutions. The State-

Published:
May 04, 2026

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Selection and Peer-
review under the
responsibility of the 7th
BIS-HSS 2025 Committee

Owned Legal Entity Higher Education Institution (PTN-BH) policy, particularly following the issuance of Permendikbudristek Number 2 of 2024 regarding Higher Education Operational Cost Standards, has become a significant issue that has garnered the attention of academics, practitioners, students, and the public. The autonomous status of PTN-BH allows state universities to manage their finances, resources, and academic activities more flexibly. However, this policy has also sparked controversy, including increased tuition fees and the potential commercialization of education, which has triggered demonstrations on various campuses [1][2]. At the same time, private universities (PTS) are facing increasing pressure as they need to compete with PTN-BH, which has structural, financial, and reputational strengths [3][4].

Although previous studies have discussed promotional strategies in higher education institutions, most of them focus on specific contexts, such as digital marketing during the pandemic or promotional tactics in general institutional settings [5][6][7]. Limited research has examined how private universities strategically respond to structural policy changes, particularly the increasing autonomy and competitiveness of State Universities with Legal Entity Status (PTN-BH). Moreover, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative exploration on how private universities integrate branding and tactical marketing in response to regulatory shifts. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing how a private university formulates adaptive promotional strategies within a structurally unequal competitive landscape.

Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) was selected as the case study due to its strategic position as one of the leading private universities in Indonesia, with consistent institutional achievements, international accreditation recognition, and stable student enrollment trends compared to many other private universities experiencing decline. According to national higher education statistics [8], several private universities have faced decreasing enrollment and institutional closure, highlighting the urgency of examining adaptive strategies. As a well-established Islamic private university competing directly with PTN-BH institutions in Yogyakarta, one of Indonesia's major education hubs, UMY provides a relevant and critical case for understanding how private institutions maintain competitiveness in a policy-driven competitive environment. This makes UMY not only a representative case of private universities but also a strategic case for examining institutional resilience under competitive policy shifts.

This study examines how Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta formulates and implements adaptive promotional strategies to navigate structural and reputational competition with PTN-BH institutions in 2024–2025. Drawing upon promotional mix theory, this study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and document analysis involving key promotional units at UMY. The study contributes to the understanding of how private universities design integrated branding and recruitment strategies to sustain competitiveness within a policy-driven higher education landscape.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how promotional strategies at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta are planned, implemented, and evaluated in response to competition with State Universities with Legal Entity Status (PTN-BH). A qualitative descriptive method was chosen because it allows for a systematic and in-depth understanding of social phenomena based on empirical field data [9][10]. This approach enables the researcher to provide a comprehensive description of strategic processes and institutional practices [11].

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in promotional planning and execution. A total of four participants were involved, representing key promotional units under the Directorate of Public Communication: the Head of Public Relations and Protocol (2021–2024), the Head of the Sub-Directorate of Admissions (2025–2029), the Head of the Sub-Directorate of Public Relations and Media (2025–2029), and a Content Creator from the Sub-Directorate of Branding and Marketing (2025–2029). The selection criteria required informants to hold strategic or operational roles and possess institutional knowledge regarding UMY's competitive positioning in response to PTN-BH policies.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility while maintaining focus through guided questions [12]. The interview protocol covered three dimensions: (1) strategic planning, (2) implementation processes, and (3) evaluation mechanisms and competitive challenges. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, was conducted face-to-face or online with consent, recorded, and transcribed for analysis. Document analysis was used to complement interview data through institutional reports, promotional materials, and official publications [13].

Data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative procedures consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing [14]. Relevant data were selected and organized into thematic categories to identify patterns and relationships among findings. To ensure validity, source triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from different informants and documentary evidence [15]. This process enhanced the credibility of findings and minimized potential bias in interpreting UMY's promotional strategies.

Results and Discussion

Results

This study finds that the promotional strategies of Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) in responding to competition with PTN-BH institutions are implemented through two complementary approaches: soft-selling and hard-selling. Soft-selling is managed by the Sub-Directorate of Public Relations & Media and Branding & Marketing, while hard-selling is handled by the Sub-Directorate of Admissions. Both

approaches operate through three interconnected stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation.

1. Promotional strategy planning

The planning stage integrates soft-selling and hard-selling orientations across five main components: determining objectives, identifying target audiences, designing promotional messages, selecting communication media, and allocating budgets. These planning components were identified based on thematic analysis of interview data. The distinctions between these approaches are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Promotional strategy planning: Soft-selling and hard-selling approaches at UMY

Planning Component	Soft-Selling Approach	Hard-Selling Approach
Determining Objectives	Strengthening institutional image, reputation, and long-term brand positioning.	Increasing student enrollment numbers and market competitiveness against PTN-BH.
Identification of Target Audience	Broad audience including prospective students, parents, alumni, and general public	Specifically targeted prospective students in final-year high school and competitive segments.
Promotional Message Design	Emphasizes achievements, accreditation, Islamic values, innovation, campus life, and student success stories.	Highlights rankings, scholarship schemes, admission deadlines, and competitive advantages.
Selection of Communication Media	Social media storytelling (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), website content, and media coverage.	School visits, education expos, targeted digital ads, and admission campaign promotions.
Determining Promotion Budget	Allocated for long-term branding activities and digital engagement programs.	Allocated for intensive recruitment campaigns and admission period promotions.

As presented in [Table 1](#), soft-selling emphasizes long-term institutional legitimacy and emotional engagement through branding narratives and multi-platform storytelling, whereas hard-selling prioritizes measurable recruitment performance and competitive positioning through more targeted and outcome-driven communication. To operationalize these strategies, UMY employs an integrated promotional mix, as summarized in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Application of promotional mix at UMY

Promotional Mix Element	Implementation at UMY
Advertising	Billboards, newspaper ads, digital ads
Direct Marketing	School visits, WhatsApp distribution
Sales Promotion	Scholarship schemes
Personal Selling	School roadshows and expos
Public Relations	Media coverage, official website
Social Media Marketing	Instagram, TikTok, influencer collaboration

As shown in [Table 2](#), the promotional mix combines branding-oriented activities, such as media coverage, storytelling content, and institutional visibility, with recruitment-oriented initiatives, including school visits, scholarship promotion, and targeted digital campaigns. This dual orientation enables UMY to balance long-term reputation building with short-term enrollment objectives.

Budget determination is guided by the Strategic Performance Indicator (SPI) system, which structures activity planning and financial allocation. Although budgets are set periodically, flexibility is maintained for incidental promotional needs. However, no specific budget is exclusively allocated to directly counter PTN-BH competition, indicating a reactive rather than strategically aggressive financial approach. After establishing the strategic framework at the planning stage, UMY proceeds to the implementation phase, where both soft-selling and hard-selling strategies are operationalized in practice.

2. Implementation of promotional activities

The implementation stage translates the planned soft-selling and hard-selling strategies into operational promotional activities. While activities are executed according to established editorial and campaign plans, implementation remains dynamic and adaptive to emerging challenges.

In the soft-selling approach, promotional activities are carried out through coordinated branding initiatives across digital and conventional media. However, implementation is influenced by both internal and external constraints. Internal challenges include content management issues, rapid staff turnover, and the need for additional content curation to ensure alignment with Muhammadiyah institutional values. Externally, the emergence of unplanned or incidental content, intensifying competition with PTN-BH institutions, and public perceptions favoring state universities create additional pressure. These challenges, however, are interpreted as opportunities to refine messaging and strengthen institutional positioning.

In the hard-selling approach, promotional activities are conducted according to structured recruitment campaigns and direct engagement with prospective students. Given its direct interaction with the target market, the Sub-Directorate of Admissions perceives PTN-BH competition as a significant structural challenge. Consequently, UMY positions itself by emphasizing distinctive advantages and alternative value propositions to remain competitive in the enrollment market. These implementation challenges demonstrate that UMY's promotional strategy operates within both organizational constraints and competitive environmental pressures. Following the execution of promotional activities, UMY conducts systematic evaluations to measure performance and identify areas for strategic adjustment.

3. Promotion evaluation

The evaluation stage functions as a mechanism for monitoring performance and refining promotional strategies. In the soft-selling approach, evaluations are conducted routinely on a weekly basis and consolidated into monthly and annual reports at the sub-directorate and university levels. Performance measurement is guided by predefined Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tailored to each communication channel, including social media engagement, media coverage output, and print promotion visibility. Evaluation data are recorded through an institutional performance system that

calculates achievement levels, complemented by third-party analytics tools to benchmark UMY’s digital performance against other private universities.

Findings from these evaluations inform content refinement and strategic adjustments. For instance, creative video formats and targeted hashtag strategies were identified as more effective, while content related to accreditation, achievements, trends, and humanistic narratives generated higher engagement. This indicates that branding effectiveness is closely linked to credibility and institutional recognition.

In the hard-selling approach, evaluation focuses primarily on measurable recruitment outcomes, particularly applicant numbers and digital campaign performance. The Sub-Directorate of Admissions acknowledges that no single formula guarantees success; therefore, recruitment strategies remain adaptive and continuously adjusted in response to competitive pressures from PTN-BH institutions. Evaluation thus serves not only as a performance assessment but also as a basis for strategic experimentation and iterative adjustment in response to competitive uncertainty. This indicates that recruitment-oriented promotion requires more structured performance measurement mechanisms beyond applicant numbers alone.

The overall promotional strategy process identified in this study can be illustrated as an integrated and adaptive cycle, as presented in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Integrated promotional strategy process at UMY

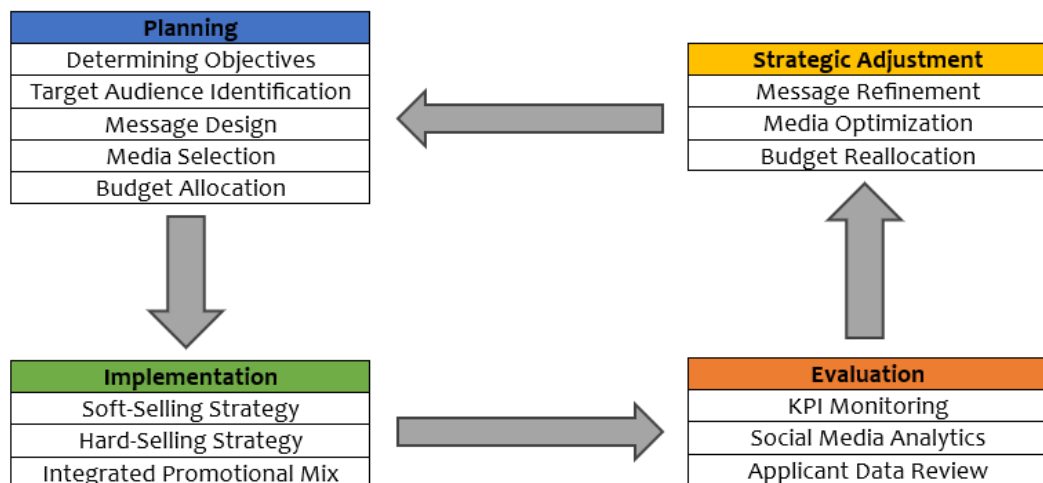


Figure 1 demonstrates that UMY’s promotional strategy operates as a continuous cycle in which planning, implementation, and evaluation are interconnected and lead to strategic adjustments in response to competitive dynamics. These findings provide a basis for deeper analytical discussion regarding the integration, competitiveness, and adaptive capacity of UMY’s promotional strategy in responding to PTN-BH competition.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) has established a structured promotional framework that differentiates soft-selling and hard-selling functions institutionally. This structural separation allows clearer objective alignment between branding and recruitment. However, the analysis reveals several

strategic gaps that require attention, particularly in integration, digital optimization, competitive positioning, and agility.

1. Coordination and integration of promotion strategies

Despite its structured design, the separation between soft-selling and hard-selling has not yet fully achieved Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). Issues such as content leakage and limited integration of audience insights suggest that engagement data from branding activities are not optimally utilized to refine recruitment targeting [16]. Ideally, high-performing content themes identified in soft-selling campaigns should inform hard-selling segmentation and messaging strategies. Without stronger integration, institutional communication risks fragmentation rather than synergy.

2. Optimizing digital and traditional channels

UMY's emphasis on Instagram and TikTok is consistent with Generation Z media consumption patterns [17]. The effectiveness of humanistic storytelling and achievement-based content supports prior research highlighting emotional engagement as central to institutional branding [18]. However, duplicating identical content across platforms reduces optimization potential, as each platform has distinct algorithmic and audience characteristics [19]. Meanwhile, traditional channels such as billboards and school roadshows remain relevant for awareness-building and relational marketing, although their measurable conversion impact is lower than digital campaigns [20]. This indicates the need for platform-specific adaptation within an integrated media strategy.

3. Response to PTN-BH competition

UMY's positioning as "Indonesia's Best Islamic University," supported by external rankings, functions as a clear unique selling proposition (USP) [21], particularly given the absence of similar religious branding among PTN-BH institutions. This differentiation strategy strengthens competitive positioning within a structurally unequal higher education landscape. Nevertheless, sustained credibility requires alignment between promotional claims and institutional performance, including graduate outcomes and innovation capacity. Furthermore, the absence of a specifically allocated competitive budget may limit strategic aggressiveness in confronting PTN-BH dominance [22].

4. Evaluation, data utilization, and agility

The soft-selling evaluation system, supported by KPIs and analytical tools, reflects a data-driven marketing approach. However, hard-selling evaluation still relies primarily on applicant numbers and conventional surveys, indicating the need for more structured and real-time mechanisms, such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM), to nurture prospective students more effectively [23]. In addition, relatively rigid budgeting mechanisms may limit UMY's responsiveness to fast-moving digital marketing opportunities, which are central to agile marketing practices in competitive environments [24].

5. Theoretical and practical implications

This study contributes theoretically to the literature on promotional strategy in higher education by demonstrating how private universities strategically respond to structural policy shifts, particularly the rise of PTN-BH institutions. While prior studies primarily focus on digital marketing tactics or general promotional activities, this research highlights the integration of branding-oriented (soft-selling) and recruitment-oriented (hard-selling) approaches within a structurally competitive environment. The findings extend promotional mix and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory by illustrating how institutional differentiation and adaptive positioning function in policy-driven market competition.

Practically, the study offers insights for private higher education institutions facing similar structural inequalities. The dual approach adopted by UMY shows that long-term brand building and short-term enrollment targets should not be treated as separate agendas but as interconnected strategies. Moreover, the importance of data-driven evaluation, media-specific adaptation, and agile budgeting mechanisms underscores the need for strategic flexibility in responding to rapidly evolving digital and regulatory environments. Overall, these analytical insights highlight both the strengths and strategic gaps within UMY's promotional framework, leading to several concluding reflections.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) responds to PTN-BH competition through an integrated dual promotional strategy that combines soft-selling for long-term institutional branding and hard-selling for direct recruitment outcomes. Systematic planning, differentiated audience targeting, digital media utilization, and continuous evaluation form the foundation of this adaptive approach, enabling UMY to strengthen its competitive positioning as “Kampus Islam Terbaik di Indonesia.”

The findings contribute to marketing communication and higher education management by demonstrating how private universities can integrate branding and tactical marketing within a policy-driven competitive landscape. Future research may quantitatively test the effectiveness of this integrated approach and conduct comparative analyses across private universities to deepen understanding of competitive adaptation in higher education markets.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the Directorate of Public Communication of Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta for providing access to data and facilitating the research process. The author also extends sincere appreciation to Mrs. Sovia Sitta Sari for her academic guidance throughout this research.

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