

## PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY IN BUILDING THE IMAGE OF UIN SUMATERA UTARA AS AN APPLIED ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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**Abstract :** This study aims to describe and analyze the public relations strategies in building the image of the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UIN-SU) as a campus based on applied Islamic sciences, as well as to identify its challenges and obstacles. This research employs a qualitative approach, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, presentation, and verification, while data validity was tested using triangulation. The findings reveal that UIN-SU's public relations strategies include: optimizing website management; promoting campus events; implementing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities through direct community involvement; collaborating with local mass media; strengthening corporate identity; publishing content via social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and newspapers; persuasive communication with prospective students; and branding efforts targeted at Islamic Senior High Schools, general Senior High Schools, and Vocational High Schools. The internal obstacles involve limited public relations personnel, while external challenges include low student awareness in disseminating campus information and the need to tailor content for Generation Z. This study contributes by offering strategic guidance for Islamic higher education institutions in effectively developing their institutional image through the strengthening of strategic communication and collaboration, particularly in the digital era.

**Keywords :** Public Relations Strategy, Institutional Image, Applied Islamic University, Digital Communication

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## Introduction

Public relations plays a strategic role in higher education institutions by managing communication between the institution and its stakeholders, including the public, students, lecturers, partners, and the media (Buchori, 2019; Dipa et al., 2023; Iqbal, 2023). The main function of public relations is to build and maintain a positive institutional image through the dissemination of relevant and credible information. In the context of universities, Public relations is responsible for promoting the institution's vision, mission, academic programs, and achievements to the public (Mukhsinuddin et al., 2021). This role becomes increasingly crucial in the digital era, where information spreads rapidly and public expectations for transparency are rising (Purwo & Puspasari, 2020). As a manager of strategic communication, Public relations plays an essential role in conveying academic achievements, research innovations, and community service programs carried out by the institution (Teguh Hidayatul Rachmad, 2015). Through various media channels such as social media, official websites, and traditional media Public relations can reach prospective students and promote the university's excellence (Hafidhah et al., 2020; Primadini et al., 2022). Furthermore, Public relations is involved in expanding networks through collaboration with institutional partners, both nationally and internationally (Ayu Sofi Syafitri & Siti Sri Wulandari, 2024; Damayanti, 2021). Public relations also holds responsibility as a crisis manager, ensuring accurate and timely information is delivered in response to issues that may affect the institution's reputation (Adha & Rohimakumullah, 2022).

In the digital age, public relations is expected to innovate through the creation of creative content such as videos, infographics, and social media campaigns and utilize data analytics to evaluate communication effectiveness (Amin et al., 2024). Given this crucial role, Public relations contributes to strengthening institutional reputation, achieving strategic university goals, and building harmonious relationships between the campus and society (Yuarko et al., 2024). The role of public relations has also become a focal point for Islamic higher education institutions such as the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UIN-SU), located in the province of Central Java. However, initial observations indicate a lack of transparency regarding the Public relations work programs of UIN-SU. Online searches using the keyword "UIN-SU public relations work programs" yielded insufficient results. Additionally, UIN-SU's official website does not provide documents explaining its public relations strategies for building institutional image. As a result, information about the strategic role of Public relations in supporting the university's vision is not publicly accessible. This underscores the need to improve communication management and publication efforts by the Public relations department to more effectively support the institution's vision and provide transparent information to the wider community.

This study examines public relations strategies in building the image of UIN-SU as an applied Islamic university in the digital era. In the realm of higher education, public relations communication strategies are essential for shaping a positive institutional image. Amalia (2020) emphasized that Public relations can enhance public trust through transparent and consistent use of both traditional and digital media. Harwinda et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of adapting digital communication to support the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mallappiang et al. (2021) underlined the role of Public relations in supporting the university's tri dharma (three pillars of higher education) by publicizing academic and community service activities to strengthen

institutional reputation. Mardiyah et al. (2023) emphasized that effective Public relations management fosters harmonious relationships between the institution and the public, forming the foundation of higher education branding. Matheos (2018) pointed out the importance of managing student information through academic portals to improve student satisfaction. Meanwhile, Munir (2023) found that innovation in digital publication and media collaboration are key factors in building institutional image. Pratiwi (2011) stressed the importance of the relationship between Public relations and the media in expanding publication reach and building public trust. Ratnasari et al. (2018) asserted that public information transparency can enhance public trust and strengthen institutional image. Syukri & Sumarni (2020) examined Public relations strategies in attracting prospective students through social media. Wulansari et al. (2023) emphasized the need for Public relations transformation in the Society 5.0 era, with a focus on integrating digital technology to meet the expectations of modern society.

The research gap in this study lies in the lack of specific investigations into public relations strategies in applied Islamic higher education institutions during the digital era (Wulansari et al., 2023). Most previous studies have focused on general universities without considering the unique characteristics of applied Islamic institutions. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of Islamic values with digital communication strategies in building institutional image. The focus of this study is the development of Public relations strategies that are adaptive to digital technology developments while considering the characteristics of UIN-SU. This study aims to provide a guideline for Public relations practices in building a positive institutional image through digital communication aligned with Islamic values. Based on the literature reviewed, it can be concluded that the success of public relations in building the image of higher education institutions depends heavily on technological adaptation, communication transparency, strategic innovation, and collaboration with various stakeholders. Innovative Public relations strategies that align with technological developments can reinforce UIN-SU's image as an excellent applied Islamic university in the digital era.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach to describe and analyze the public relations strategies used to build the image of the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UIN-SU) as an applied Islamic university. This method was selected to understand how communication strategies are implemented within the university setting and to identify the influencing factors. Data were collected using three techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation.

Observation was conducted by directly monitoring the activities of UIN-SU's public relations department, including website management, social media publications, and community engagement. Interviews were held with key informants such as Public relations officials, relevant staff members, and students to gather their perspectives on the effectiveness of the public relations strategies implemented. Documentation involved collecting archives, activity reports, publications, and digital content produced by UIN-SU's public relations division.

Data analysis was carried out in three stages: data reduction, data display, and verification. During the reduction phase, the collected data were selected and focused on information relevant to the research objectives. The data were then presented in

descriptive narrative form to facilitate interpretation and conclusion drawing. Verification was conducted through triangulation, by comparing data from different sources to ensure the consistency and validity of the findings.

Triangulation was used to verify data accuracy by cross-checking the results of observation, interviews, and documentation. In addition, the researcher reconfirmed the findings with key informants to ensure alignment with field realities. This method focused on gathering operational data related to public relations strategies applied by UIN-SU. The results are expected to provide practical recommendations for Islamic higher education institutions in enhancing their institutional image through strategic communication in the digital era. Identified challenges, such as limited Public relations personnel and difficulties in tailoring content for Generation Z, were also analyzed to offer relevant solutions. This study aims to serve as a practical guide for university Public relations departments to build public trust and expand the reach of institutional communication.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **UIN Sumatera Utara as a Campus of Applied Islamic Sciences**

Applied Islamic Sciences introduces a practical paradigm in Islamic teachings that emphasizes the practical aspects of human life. This paradigm was first introduced by Prof. Muslim Abdul Kadir as a solution to societal problems. He emphasized the importance of practical values in science, focusing on muamalah aspects such as economics, politics, socio-culture, law, education, science, and technology, in addition to worship (Salamah et al., 2020). Prof. Muslim Abdul Kadir asserted that the Qur'an and Sunnah are essential components of the practical paradigm. Factual Islam, which reflects the actual religiosity of believers, also becomes the foundation of this approach. The factualization of Islam is the process of transforming ideal concepts into everyday realities. In this way, the universal principles of Islam can be more accommodative and contextual in community life (Muslim A. Kadir, 2003).

At UIN Sumatera Utara, Applied Islamic Sciences becomes a flagship course aimed at developing competencies based on locality and values of tolerance. This course is designed to strengthen students' understanding of the application of Islamic teachings in real life. Besides formal courses, UIN-SU also conducts programs outside class hours that do not carry credit weight. In this class, students engage in interactive discussions with keynote speakers about the concepts and applications of Applied Islamic Sciences in daily life. Students are also assigned to review Prof. Muslim Abdul Kadir's work titled "Ilmu Islam Terapan" (Applied Islamic Sciences). The IIT program aims to instill religious moderation and build multicultural awareness. Through this program, students are expected to have an open mindset and be able to integrate into culturally and religiously diverse communities (Muslim A. Kadir, 2003).

### **Public Relations Strategy of UIN Sumatera Utara in Building a Positive Institutional Image**

The existence of public relations in an institution plays an important role in building its image. UIN-SU as a campus based on Applied Islamic Sciences cannot be separated from the role of public relations in introducing campus activities to the public. Public relations are tasked with planning work programs to enhance the campus image. UIN-SU's public relations strategies to improve campus image are divided into internal and external strategies.

Internal strategies involve public relations actions within the campus. Campus image is influenced by the condition of facilities and infrastructure. Therefore, educational facilities must be in good condition before promoting the campus to the public. Internal campus information is disseminated by public relations through videos, infographics, and news published on the campus's social media such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and the official website. According to H, one of the public relations staff, the information received is adjusted to needs and then published on social media. Public relations also manage content related to academic achievements, student activities, and promotion of existing study programs at UIN-SU. Thus, public relations play an active role in maintaining the campus image internally.

**External strategies involve several aspects:**

The publications carried out by the UIN-SU public relations staff involve various platforms, including social media, print media such as newspapers and magazines, as well as brochures and calendars. Social media serves as a primary tool to reach the broader public with content designed to promote campus programs, especially those related to Applied Islamic Sciences. Public relations utilize Instagram as a primary platform, especially during the month of Ramadan, to publish Islamic content, which is then evaluated through insights to understand public responses. Collaboration with mass media is also an essential part of the public relations strategy.

Public relations collaborate with local print media such as Suara Merdeka, Muria News, and Beta News to publish campus news. These print media are used to highlight academic achievements, campus activities, and other flagship programs. For physical distribution, calendars and brochures containing information about the campus profile, achievements, and activities are used during new student admissions (PMB) promotions to various schools. The published activities include routine activities such as the new student admission schedule through UMPTKIN and incidental events such as local events or special programs. According to schedule, public relations staff conduct documentation and publication of each significant event, ensuring the public receives relevant and up-to-date information about UIN-SU. In addition, the campus website is also optimized to deliver accurate and detailed information about the Applied Islamic Sciences program. The content on the website is designed with a focus on strengthening the campus's core messages, ensuring that the public can easily access the necessary information. This aims to enhance UIN-SU's image as an institution based on Applied Islamic Sciences.

Events run by UIN-SU's public relations to build the image of the Applied Islamic Sciences-based campus include hosting media gatherings. Technically, the information received by the public relations staff of UIN-SU is later made into information through the media. This information is presented in the form of videos, infographics, or designs according to the need. The staff explained that the event organized was a media gathering. Media gatherings are held once a year at the end of the year by inviting journalist colleagues. For the following year, public relations staff plan to hold FGD (focus group discussions), benchmarking, and media gatherings.

Besides organizing media gatherings, UIN-SU public relations in building the image of an Applied Islamic Sciences-based campus is also carried out by participating in publishing activities conducted by students during community service (KKN). UIN-SU public relations have never organized independent events so far.

Hence, related to Applied Islam, they participate in them by publishing and implementing applied Islam in KKN activities.

Whenever there is a large event or activity, public relations are involved behind the scenes, even if they are not fully responsible for the event. In building the image of a campus based on applied Islamic sciences, UIN-SU's public relations also conduct live streaming or coverage videos of graduation ceremonies or faculty events involving religious and social activities.

Corporate identity plays an important role in building a consistent image. Visual identity such as the logo, colors, and campus slogan is used consistently across all communication channels. Public relations chose green as the main element in social media design to reflect the Islamic values that form the foundation of the institution. With coordinated visuals, UIN-SU hopes to enhance its appeal in the eyes of the public.

Lobbying and negotiation are necessary activities for designing short- and long-term strategies. At UIN-SU, lobbying and negotiation are mostly handled by the student affairs and cooperation divisions, while public relations focus more on advertising and promotion. Nevertheless, public relations still play a role in communicating with external partners who support campus development, such as other educational institutions, local governments, and private organizations.

In terms of social responsibility, public relations act as a bridge between the institution and the public. UIN-SU public relations contribute to building the campus's image as one based on Applied Islamic Sciences by publishing social service (CSR) activities carried out by Dharma Wanita Persatuan and the Center for Gender & Child Studies. Interview findings with T mentioned that Dharma Wanita Persatuan and the Gender & Child Study Center directly participated in responding to flood victims in Demak by providing Psychological First Aid through psychological and spiritual support. UIN-SU public relations were involved in publication because they are still under the same institutional umbrella. For children, trauma healing in the form of play therapy was conducted by lecturers and students. Dharma Wanita is part of UIN-SU and one of the campus communities. In all activities, UIN-SU public relations staff still operate under the main institution.

The same applies to other social aid activities carried out by PKM or LPPM UIN-SU, where public relations also accompany and publish these activities. According to interview results with T, those directly involved in social assistance activities were from PKM and LPPM, while UIN-SU public relations were involved in writing news and publishing it through Instagram and the website.

The publication strategies implemented by UIN-SU public relations have made significant contributions in efforts to improve the campus image, including promoting the Applied Islamic Sciences paradigm through various digital platforms such as the official website and social media. As a new paradigm in Islamic education, Applied Islamic Sciences requires massive and structured socialization efforts so that the wider community, including students, can understand its values and relevance. In this context, the presence of websites and social media plays an important role as communication media that can reach a wider audience with high efficiency. According to findings presented by Khairuddin Nento and Anis Masruri (2020), websites function as effective interactive publication platforms (Nento & Masruri, 2020).

Websites have advantages in terms of relatively low operational costs and flexibility in presenting information in various engaging formats that are accessible

globally. As administrators, website managers are expected to maximize this potential by presenting informative, relevant, and highly appealing content. A website is not only a tool to disseminate information but also serves as a marketing tool, institutional transparency channel, and even a means to build campus reputation. However, analysis from a triangulator PR offers a critical perspective on the implementation of UIN-SU's public relations strategy. According to the triangulator, efforts made so far are still limited to routine activities such as documentation and general publication without a clear focus on strengthening the campus image as an institution based on Applied Islamic Sciences.

Public relations have not fully directed communication strategies toward conveying the core values of Applied Islamic Sciences. Indicators that mark or characterize the paradigm of Applied Islamic Sciences have not been integrated into the communicated content. As a result, the public and students have not gained a deep understanding of the concept. The current approach taken by UIN-SU's public relations emphasizes more on informative functions rather than strategic ones. Branding efforts that should be designed to build the image and reputation of the campus based on Applied Islamic Sciences are not yet evident. This indicates that the existing publication and communication strategies still need refinement. In the future, it is essential for UIN-SU public relations to develop communication strategies that focus more on delivering the substance of Applied Islamic Sciences.

This can be done by presenting engaging educational content, developing narratives that illustrate the benefits and relevance of the paradigm, and integrating specific indicators of Applied Islamic Sciences into communication materials. With this approach, public relations can build a deeper understanding among students and the community while strengthening the image of the campus as a pioneer in the new paradigm of Islamic education. This strategy not only helps improve UIN-SU's reputation but also supports the institution's vision in the context of Islamic education relevant to the needs of the times.

### **Challenges in UIN Sumatera Utara's Public Relations in Building the Image of an Applied Islamic Sciences Campus**

The implementation of public relations strategies at UIN Sumatera Utara in building the image as a campus based on Applied Islamic Sciences faces various obstacles and challenges. These obstacles are divided into internal and external ones that affect the effectiveness of public relations in carrying out their duties.

Internal obstacles faced by UIN-SU public relations are related to the limitations of human resources. Currently, the public relations team consists of only three people who are responsible for managing all campus activity exposure processes. This limitation becomes a challenge, especially when many events must be covered and published simultaneously. Often in a day, public relations are overwhelmed because they have to produce various types of content, such as videos, infographics, and news articles.

This personnel limitation can reduce public relations productivity in building the campus image. Adequate human resources are crucial to improve publication quality and expand the reach of information to the public. Without additional personnel balanced with workload, public relations will continue to face difficulties in performing their tasks optimally. Moreover, institutional leadership must be committed to empowering public relations. Public relations should not only be

involved in technical activities such as documentation and publication but also in more strategic and substantive matters. Campus leaders need to ensure that public relations have a significant role in formulating communication policies.

Thus, public relations can be more effective in functioning as a bridge between the campus and the public and in building a positive campus image. Human resource development in the field of public relations is crucial. Public relations who understand their strategic role will be able to formulate and implement effective communication policies and maximize the role of media in promoting the excellence of the campus to the public.

Besides internal obstacles, UIN-SU's public relations also face significant external challenges. One such challenge is the lack of awareness from students and all components of UIN-SU's academic community to actively disseminate positive information about the campus. In fact, active participation from all campus elements is needed to strengthen the campus image in the public eye.

Another external challenge is the difficulty in adapting publication content to the characteristics of the younger generation, especially Gen Z. This generation has different content preferences, so public relations need to adapt to ensure the content is accepted and engaging. Informative content alone is not enough; it must be presented in an interesting, creative format that suits Gen Z's interactive and visual communication style. One of the efforts made by UIN-SU's public relations to overcome this external challenge is to conduct more massive publications. Public relations actively publish various campus-related information through social media and other digital platforms.

Promotional content such as new student admissions (PMB) information is created intensively. This content not only focuses on promotion but is also educational, explaining various study programs, campus facilities, and career prospects for UIN-SU graduates. The educational publication aims to provide better understanding to the public about what UIN-SU offers. Public relations try to highlight the added value of the campus, such as the concept of Applied Islamic Sciences, which distinguishes UIN from other campuses. With the delivery of comprehensive and engaging information, it is hoped that the public, including prospective students and other stakeholders, will better understand UIN-SU's advantages. In addition to social media publications, public relations also utilize campus events as a means to build a positive image. Events like media gatherings and social activities are used to ensure that information reaches a wider audience.

These efforts are carried out by documenting activities in the form of videos, infographics, and news published on the campus's social media. The success of public relations in facing these challenges depends greatly on effective communication strategies. In addition, synergy is needed among public relations, campus leaders, students, and all academic community elements to jointly promote the campus's excellence. With a comprehensive and sustainable approach, it is hoped that UIN-SU's image as a campus based on Applied Islamic Sciences will continue to rise and become more widely recognized by the public.

This article demonstrates that the public relations strategies implemented by UIN-SU in building a positive institutional image involve two main aspects, namely internal and external strategies. Both strategies play a crucial role in introducing UIN-SU as a campus based on Applied Islamic Sciences to the wider community. Internally, public relations focus on managing the campus image from within,

including using social media such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and the official website to publish academic achievements, student activities, and promote study programs. The content aims to highlight the campus's advantages and portray a positive academic atmosphere. In addition, public relations ensure that the quality of educational facilities is well-maintained before conducting external promotions.

This internal strategy is important to create harmony between the image presented to the public and the actual conditions on campus. Externally, UIN-SU public relations carry out various activities to expand communication outreach with the public. These activities include publications via social media, cooperation with mass media, organizing events such as graduations and seminars, and strengthening corporate identity through consistent use of logos, colors, and slogans. Digital publications serve as the main means of reaching the younger generation, especially Gen Z, who are active on digital platforms. Campus events are also used as opportunities to build relationships with the media and public, while cooperation with mass media, though still informal, is an initial step to expanding external communication networks. However, this study finds that UIN-SU's public relations strategy still tends to focus on publication and documentation aspects, and therefore has not fully succeeded in directing the campus image toward the Applied Islamic Sciences concept it promotes.

This study is relevant to findings that highlight the importance of planned communication strategies in increasing public trust toward higher education institutions. The use of social media as a communication tool, as explained by Wulansari et al. (2023), shows that digital technology is an effective medium for delivering institutional messages. However, UIN-SU has not yet fully maximized the potential of digital media to socialize Applied Islamic Sciences, hence the need for more creative and innovative communication campaigns. Strengthening corporate identity is also a key point, as revealed by Ratnasari et al. (2018), because this element significantly contributes to building institutional image.

This article also highlights the limitation of human resources (HR) in UIN-SU's public relations team as a major challenge. With only three personnel, public relations often struggle to manage various communication activities. This condition supports the findings of Munir (2023) who stated that limited HR is a barrier to the implementation of effective public relations strategies. Institutional support to enhance HR capacity, both through training and personnel addition, is very much needed so that communication strategies can be implemented more optimally. In addition, solid internal communication, as emphasized by Mardiyah et al. (2023), is an important foundation in building an authentic positive image. Although the strategies implemented by UIN-SU public relations have shown positive impacts, this study identifies the need to evaluate the impact of these strategies on public perception. This step is important to understand the extent to which the efforts have succeeded in creating a positive institutional image. With the optimization of public relations strategies involving digital innovation, strengthening media collaboration, and planned communication management, UIN-SU has great potential to strengthen its position as a leading campus in Applied Islamic Sciences at the national level. This article makes a significant contribution to understanding the strategic role of public relations in building the image of higher education institutions, especially in a digital era that demands continuous adaptation and innovation.

## Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the public relations strategy of UIN-SU plays a crucial role in building a positive image as a campus based on Applied Islamic Sciences. This strategy consists of two main aspects: internal and external. On the internal side, the public relations office utilizes social media, the official website, and the publication of academic achievements and student activities to create a positive image. In addition, the quality of campus facilities is maintained to ensure that the promoted image reflects the actual conditions. This strategy highlights the importance of strengthening internal quality before reaching out to the wider public.

On the external side, public relations efforts include the use of digital media, cooperation with mass media, and the organization of events such as seminars and graduation ceremonies. Corporate identity elements such as logos, colors, and slogans are consistently used to strengthen campus branding. However, the research findings indicate that the external strategy still focuses primarily on publication and documentation, and thus has not yet been fully optimized in promoting the concept of Applied Islamic Sciences.

This study highlights the importance of optimizing digital media to reach younger generations and the need for institutional support to enhance the capacity of the public relations team to ensure more effective communication strategies. With innovative digital campaigns and strengthened communication strategies, UIN-SU has a great opportunity to enhance its position both locally and nationally.

For future researchers, it is recommended to measure the impact of public relations strategies on public perception, conduct comparative studies among institutions, and explore the role of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence to improve the effectiveness of public relations communication in the digital era.

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