

Employee Branding in Higher Education: A Study of Lecturers and Educational Staff

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Abstract

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in developing future generations through education, research, and community service. This study aims to examine the recognition and appreciation of employee branding within the campus environment, focusing on lecturers and administrative staff at STIE Yapan. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, involving 12 informants selected through purposive sampling, consisting of 10 lecturers and 2 administrative staff. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that employee branding is well understood, but has not been systematically integrated into institutional policies. The appreciation given tends to be symbolic, and program implementation has not been optimally coordinated. The main obstacles include time constraints, lack of socialization, and a low understanding of the individual's role in institutional branding. Therefore, employee branding values need to be integrated into academic culture through strengthening the appreciation system and sustained internal communication. Practically, higher education institutions need to develop structured employee branding policies, implement transparent recognition and reward mechanisms, and organize ongoing training and communication programs to enhance the engagement of academic community members. These efforts are expected to strengthen institutional reputation, enhance employee commitment, and build a sustainable organizational culture. This study contributes to the limited literature on employee branding in small-to-medium private higher education institutions in Indonesia.

Keywords: Appreciation, Employee branding, Private higher education, Recognition

INTRODUCTION

Universities play a crucial role in developing future generations through education, research, and community service. However, achieving these goals requires the quality of the human resources (HR) employed within them, namely lecturers and educational staff.(Kahn, 2017). Their performance and motivation are often influenced by how they are treated in their work environment, particularly through recognition and appreciation for their contributions.(Cascio & Boudreau, 2020; Patel et al., 2021). Recognition and appreciation not only create individual

satisfaction, but can also increase commitment, loyalty, and performance, which ultimately improves the image and reputation of the university as a workplace.(Ahmad & Arif, 2022; Vandenabeele & Geuens, 2020).

Employee branding, or the image of a company as an attractive place to work, applies not only in the corporate sector, but also in the world of higher education.(Backhaus & Tikoo, 2019). A positive image formed through employee branding can attract the attention of qualified educators and educational staff, and retain them in the long term.(Jain & Sadh, 2020).

Therefore, it is important to understand how recognition and appreciation can influence employee branding on campus. One way to assess this is by observing how lecturers and educational staff respond to recognition policies and practices on their campuses. Recognition and appreciation for employee branding in higher education play a crucial role in creating a positive and productive environment for both lecturers and educational staff. Employee branding refers to efforts to build an employee image that is integrated with the image of the institution, which in turn can influence individual loyalty, motivation, and work quality within the organization. (Bente & Bucher, 2019; Islam & Khan, 2021) In the world of higher education, this concept is increasingly relevant because it plays a major role in improving the quality of human resources and the image of universities, which is a key factor in winning global competition in the field of education. (Müller et al., 2020).

Universities like STIE Yapan need to develop recognition and appreciation for employee branding to foster closer relationships between faculty, staff, and the institution. Employee branding encompasses more than just employee image management, but also recognition of their contributions to supporting the university's vision and mission. (Buitendach & De Witte, 2019). Appreciation for employee contributions, especially for lecturers and educational staff, is believed to increase their job satisfaction and commitment to the institution. (Ullah et al., 2020).

The importance of effective employee branding management in higher education is reflected in the increased loyalty and

productivity of lecturers and other educational staff. This can be achieved through recognition of their achievements and roles, not only in academic terms but also in their contributions to supporting the overall development of the institution (Guzmán & Herrera, 2021). As part of human resource management, this approach serves to create a work environment that is mutually supportive, collaborative, and committed to organizational goals (Vandenabeele & Geuens, 2019).

Several empirical studies reinforce the urgency of this issue. In Pakistan, a study of 394 respondents in higher education institutions found that employer branding plays a strategic role in talent retention, mediated by employee engagement. In Uganda, a study of 218 respondents showed that among three employer branding dimensions, only reward strategy and people orientedness significantly predicted retention. In Ghana, salary and fringe benefits together explained 60% of the variance in retention among private-university academic staff, with the effect of fringe benefits (a non-monetary factor) outweighing salary itself—suggesting that in budget-constrained private institutions, non-monetary forms of recognition may matter more than direct compensation. This pattern is relevant to the Indonesian context, which several studies note has one of the highest turnover intention rates in Southeast Asia. Collectively, these findings confirm that employee branding is not merely a theoretical construct but a measurable predictor of retention—yet most of this evidence comes from public universities or large institutions, not from

small private higher education institutions such as STIE Yapan.

Although a number of studies have shown the positive impact of employee branding on employee performance and loyalty, not all studies have produced uniform findings. (Alshathry et al., 2020) found that implementing employee branding without a healthy organizational culture can actually create a gap between the image the institution wants to build and the actual experiences employees experience, thus triggering cynicism and distrust of management. In line with this, (Rahman et al., 2020) adding that in an environment with an uncompetitive compensation system, efforts to build a positive image through branding can actually have a paradoxical effect, where employees view such initiatives as empty image-building that is not in line with their daily work reality.

This condition is even more relevant when linked to the context of private higher education institutions such as STIE Yapan, where budget limitations, uneven workloads, and the lack of a structured reward system often become challenges in themselves (Susanto et al., 2021). Therefore, this research is very crucial, not only to confirm the benefits of employee branding, but also to identify more honestly the extent to which these supporting conditions have or have not been met, considering that the success of employee branding is very much determined by the readiness of the organization's internal ecosystem as a whole (Ahmad & Arif, 2022; Vandenabeele & Geuens, 2020). Without a deep understanding of this gap, the employee branding strategy implemented risks being only a superficial layer that does not touch

the real root of the problem, as emphasized by (Susanto et al., 2021) that branding effectiveness can only be achieved when institutional values are truly internalized in the real work experiences of each individual, not just contained in institutional narratives alone.

Although the literature on employee branding in higher education continues to grow, several gaps remain unaddressed: (1) most studies focus on public universities or large institutions, while the dynamics within small, resource-constrained private institutions such as STIE Yapan remain underexplored; (2) the paradoxical effect of branding when recognition initiatives are not backed by a healthy organizational culture or a competitive compensation system—has rarely been tested specifically within the recognition and appreciation dimension; and (3) prior research is predominantly quantitative-correlational, without examining how lecturers and educational staff subjectively interpret the recognition practices they receive.

Based on these gaps, this research offers the following contributions: theoretically, it extends employee branding research into the context of small private higher education institutions, a setting that remains rarely studied; practically, it provides STIE Yapan with an evidence-based foundation for designing recognition practices that are realistic given budget constraints; and methodologically, it evaluates the institution's internal readiness (organizational culture, workload, and reward structure) as a precondition for effective employee branding, rather than assuming these conditions are already met.

METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, a consciously chosen approach deemed most appropriate for exploring the subjective experiences of lecturers and educational staff in interpreting the recognition and appreciation of employee branding within their campus environment. The phenomenological approach itself goes beyond simply recording what happens, but rather seeks to understand how a phenomenon is experienced and perceived by the individuals directly involved. (Creswell & Poth, 2019) Therefore, this design is considered appropriate, considering that employee branding is a highly personal and contextual concept, and cannot be fully understood through numbers alone.

This phenomenological design was applied through three complementary data collection instruments: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to directly explore the informants' views, feelings, and experiences regarding how they perceive employee branding at their institution. Meanwhile, participant observation was used to directly observe internal branding practices taking place on campus, allowing researchers to rely not only on what informants say but also on what actually happens in the field. Documentation analysis was conducted to enrich researchers' understanding of policies, HR programs, and various activities related to institutional branding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2020).

The selection of informants in this study used a purposive sampling technique,

based on the following criteria: (1) position (permanent lecturer, contract lecturer, or educational staff), (2) a minimum of two years of service, (3) direct involvement in the institution's branding-related activities, and (4) willingness to openly reflect on experiences of being recognized as well as being overlooked by the institution. Through this approach, 12 informants were selected, consisting of 10 lecturers and 2 educational staff at STIE Yapan. The 10 lecturers represented a range of academic ranks, from junior lecturers to those holding structural positions, while the two educational staff informants came from the academic administration and human resources units, to avoid the resulting themes being dominated by a single perspective

The selection of this number of informants was based on the principle of data sufficiency or data saturation, where data collection is stopped when information obtained from one informant to the next no longer produces significant new findings (Guest et al., 2020). Coding was carried out after each interview so that saturation could be monitored as data collection progressed; the saturation point was considered reached when three consecutive informants (the 10th through the 12th) no longer yielded relevant new codes, making the final count of 12 informants an evidence-based stopping point rather than a number fixed in advance.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques which involved the process of coding, categorizing, and organizing themes systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Saldana, 2021) The analysis followed six stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts,

observation notes, and documents; inductive generation of initial codes; grouping of codes into candidate themes; review of themes to ensure coherence and clear distinction between them; definition and naming of final themes; and the production of a narrative account of the findings, interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework and prior empirical findings discussed in the introduction.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, this study employed source triangulation and theory triangulation, allowing data from interviews, observations, and documentation to be mutually verified. Furthermore, member checking was employed, requiring informants to review their interviews to ensure that the researcher's interpretations truly reflected the informants' intended meanings and experiences (Charmaz, 2019; Maxwell, 2020) Equally important, the entire research process was carried out with high ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent from informants and maintaining the confidentiality of all participants' personal data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research was conducted at the STIE Yapan, involving 12 purposively selected informants, consisting of 10 lecturers and 2 educational staff. The data collection process was carried out through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. From this process, four main themes were found that consistently emerged in the informants' experiences: recognition of

employee branding, perceptions of appreciation, implementation of the branding program, and obstacles encountered in its implementation.

Recognition of Employee Branding in the Campus Environment

When interviewees were asked about their understanding of employee branding, most responded positively, albeit with varying degrees of understanding. Lecturers with long-standing experience at the institution tended to have a more mature understanding of the importance of campus image, while educational staff understood branding more from an operational and day-to-day service perspective. This reflects the fact that recognition of the concept of employee branding has grown organically within the academic community, although it has not yet been fully formalized in a clear policy.

Based on in-depth interviews, most informants expressed awareness of their role as representatives of the institution before students, parents, and the wider community. One senior lecturer, for example, stated that the way he teaches, communicates, and conducts himself on campus indirectly reflects the institution's image. However, this awareness stems more from personal initiative than from systematic encouragement from the institution. Meanwhile, participant observation revealed that branding-related activities such as seminars, training, and self-development programs do take place on campus, but the involvement of lecturers and educational staff remains sporadic and uneven (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2019).

Table 1. Recognition of Employee Branding at STIE Yapan

Category	Number of Informants	Percentage (%)	Information
Strongly agree	5	41.7%	Very high recognition of the concept of employee branding
Agree	6	50%	Recognizing the importance, even though implementation is not yet optimal
Don't agree	1	8.3%	Consider employee branding less relevant in the campus environment

Table 1 shows that 91.7% of respondents (50% agreed and 41.7% strongly agreed) acknowledged the relevance of employee branding, with only one respondent (8.3%) disagreeing on the grounds that the branding program had not yet reached or influenced their day-to-day work activities.

This high level of recognition is in line with the findings (Matongolo et al., 2018) which emphasizes that employee awareness of employee branding attributes is the foundation for building sustainable organizational commitment in higher education institutions. Similarly, (Hadi & Ahmed, 2018) found that employees who recognize and acknowledge their institution's branding program tend to have higher job satisfaction and lower intentions to leave the institution. These two studies reinforce the research findings that the foundation of

awareness at STIE Yapan is already well-established.

However, it is worth noting that half of the informants who agreed explicitly added the note that the implementation of employee branding in the field has not been running optimally. This condition indicates a gap between conceptual awareness and actual practice, a pattern also identified by (Saurombe et al., 2017) In higher education institutions in South Africa, understanding of employee branding often remains at the perceptual level without being supported by a structured implementation strategy. Therefore, the real challenge for STIE Yapan is no longer building awareness, but translating that recognition into a concrete, consistent branding program that benefits the entire academic community.

Perception of Appreciation for Employee Branding

The second theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews was the informants' perceptions of the appreciation they received for their contributions to the institutional branding process. Interestingly, almost all informants acknowledged that they felt valued as individuals, but at the same time, they also revealed that this appreciation often came in symbolic forms rather than concrete, structured recognition. This situation illustrates the gap between the institution's good intentions and what employees actually experience on the ground.

Furthermore, interviews revealed that lecturers felt that they received far less appreciation for their contributions to campus branding activities compared to other educational staff, who were directly involved in HR programs on a daily basis. One lecturer

even stated that he only realized he was contributing to campus branding after a new student mentioned the institution's name based on a recommendation from an alumni he had taught. This finding is reinforced by observations that indicate that formal appreciation mechanisms, such as best lecturer awards or public recognition for academic achievement, remain very limited in frequency (Patton, 2020; van Zoonen et al., 2019).

Table 2. Perception of Appreciation of Employee Branding Based on Informant Groups

Group	Category	Number	Percentage (%)	Information
Lecturers (n=10)	Very Adequate	1	10%	Feel that appreciation for academic and branding contributions has been sufficient
	Adequate	6	60%	Appreciation is felt to exist, but is more symbolic and inconsistent.
	Insufficient	3	30%	Contributions to branding are rarely formally recognized by institutions.
Educational Staff (n=2)	Very Adequate	2	100%	Appreciation is quite fulfilled due to direct involvement in HR programs
	Adequate	0	0%	–
	Insufficient	0	0%	–

Table 2 reveals a perceptual gap between the two groups: all administrative staff (100%) considered the recognition they received to be adequate, whereas 30% of lecturers felt that their contributions were not formally acknowledged, and the majority of

the remaining lecturers (60%) perceived the existing recognition as merely symbolic.

This gap can be explained through the logic of contribution visibility: the contributions of educational staff are direct and measurable (administration, HR services), making them easier for management to appreciate, whereas lecturers' contributions to institutional image through teaching quality, scientific publications, and alumni relations are indirect and difficult to attribute instantly to branding outcomes. This pattern is consistent with the argument advanced by (van Zoonen et al., 2019) that organizations tend to appreciate contributions that are structurally easier to observe, such that "silent" contributions like quality teaching risk being overlooked within formal reward systems. This finding also reinforces and further sharpens the argument put forward by (Alshathry et al., 2020) regarding the risk of cynicism when branding is not accompanied by equitable recognition: in the case of STIE Yapan, cynicism has not yet emerged explicitly, but this seed of perceptual inequality has the potential to develop into demotivation if left unaddressed. The implication for HR management is the need to broaden the criteria for formal appreciation to encompass indicators of indirect contribution such as student teaching evaluations, publication output, or alumni testimonials so that the reward system is no longer biased toward contributions that are merely "visible."

Implementation of Employee Branding in the Campus Environment

Moving from perception to actual practice, the research findings indicate that employee branding implementation at STIE

Yapan has indeed been underway, but not yet within a well-coordinated framework. Through a documentation analysis of existing HR programs, the researchers found that most activities indirectly related to branding focused more on developing individual competencies, such as training and workshops, rather than on building a collective identity that strengthens the institution's overall image.

Interviews also revealed that many lecturers were aware of these programs but did not understand their connection to the institution's overall branding strategy. In other words, there is a common thread that should connect human resource development activities to building the campus's image, but this thread has never been explicitly communicated to the entire academic community. This situation clarifies the findings of participant observation that the branding culture on this campus remains implicit and has not been internalized as part of a shared identity (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Table 3. Implementation of the Employee Branding Program

Known Activities	Number of Informants	Percentage (%)	Information
Human Resources Development	8	66.7%	The program most often associated with employee branding
Extracurricular Activities	4	33.3%	Campus branding activities that are known to some lecturers outside of class activities

Table 3 indicates that informants' perceptions of employee branding remain concentrated within two domains, namely human resource development (66.7%) and extracurricular activities (33.3%), whereas core, day to day academic activities, such as teaching and student mentoring, have yet to be recognized as an integral component of the institution's branding efforts.

This finding reveals a fundamental conceptual gap between the employer branding literature and its practical implementation in the field. Unlike the frameworks proposed by (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2019; Bente & Bucher, 2019), which position employee branding as a process embedded throughout the entirety of employees' work experience, the practice at STIE Yapan instead reduces branding to a series of events detached from the mainstream of academic activities, consistent with (Rahman et al., 2020) critique that branding not integrated with everyday work realities risks being perceived as "empty image making." Interestingly, this finding also reveals a paradox: precisely in the domain where branding forms most organically, namely the classroom, academic advising sessions, and lecturer student interactions, the institution has not yet consciously engaged in managing this as part of its branding strategy. The implication for HR management is the need for a paradigmatic shift from branding as a program to branding as an integrated practice, for instance by embedding institutional values into the Semester Learning Plan (RPS), academic advising guidelines, and service standards, so that lecturers come to understand their daily duties as inherently constituting an act of

branding, rather than as an addition beyond their core responsibilities (Zhang et al., 2021).

Obstacles in Implementing Employee Branding

The final theme that emerged consistently throughout the data collection process was the various obstacles encountered in implementing employee branding. These obstacles do not originate from a single source, but rather are the accumulation of several interrelated and mutually reinforcing factors. Interestingly, when these obstacles were categorized by informant group, distinct patterns emerged between lecturers and educational staff, both in terms of the type and intensity of the obstacles they experienced.

For lecturers, the most frequently cited obstacle is limited time. This is understandable, given that their academic workload, which includes teaching, research, and community service, already demands significant attention and energy. Therefore, involvement in branding activities is often seen as an additional burden that is difficult to accommodate. Meanwhile, educational staff often highlight the lack of outreach as their main obstacle, as they feel they don't always receive sufficient information about the direction and objectives of the branding program being implemented by the institution. This situation ultimately creates a communication gap that makes branding efforts disjointed and unintegrated (Guest et al., 2020; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2019).

Table 4. Obstacles Faced in Implementing Employee Branding Based on Informant Groups

Group	Constraint	Number of Informants	Percentage (%)	Information
Lecturers (n=10)	Lack of Time	5	50%	The heavy academic load makes it difficult to actively engage in branding programs.
	Lack of Socialization	3	30%	Information about branding initiatives is not always conveyed to lecturers.
	Lack of Understanding	2	20%	The role of lecturers in the context of institutional employee branding is not yet fully understood.
Educational Staff (n=2)	Lack of Time	1	50%	Daily administrative tasks leave little room for involvement in branding.
	Lack of Socialization	1	50%	Directions regarding the branding program from management are not felt to be clear enough.
	Lack of Understanding	0	0%	-

Table 4 shows that limited time was the greatest challenge reported by both groups. However, only lecturers identified a lack of understanding of their role (20%) as a barrier, whereas inadequate socialization of the program emerged as the primary concern among administrative staff (50%).

The table above shows that although both groups experience time constraints, the root causes are different. Lecturers face time

pressure stemming from the complex demands of the Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi (Three Pillars of Higher Education), while administrative staff are more burdened by busy administrative routines. Furthermore, the lack of understanding of employee branding is particularly noteworthy, as it is found only among lecturers, not administrative staff. This suggests that the socialization of the concept of employee branding has so far focused more on the operational realm than the academic realm. Therefore, different communication approaches are needed to reach these two groups more effectively (Guest et al., 2020; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2019).

In response to these findings, institutions need to redesign how they deliver branding messages to lecturers, using a more contextual and academically relevant approach. One concrete step is to embed the institutional branding narrative into routine academic forums, such as study program meetings, internal seminars, or new lecturer orientation sessions, so that the message doesn't feel foreign or forced, but rather naturally presents itself as part of the academic conversation they are already familiar with. In this way, the barriers of understanding that have long served as a barrier between lecturers and institutional branding programs can be gradually broken down, and lecturers' involvement in building the campus's image can grow more genuinely and sustainably (Alshathry et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2020).

Overall, the four themes identified in this study form a comprehensive picture of the state of employee branding at STIE Yapan. On the one hand, awareness and

recognition of the importance of branding have begun to grow among lecturers and educational staff. However, on the other hand, this awareness is not yet supported by an adequate appreciation system, coordinated implementation, or effective internal communication. More fundamentally, the values of institutional branding have not yet been successfully infused into daily academic activities, so lecturers still view their role in campus image as something outside their primary duties. Therefore, more systematic and comprehensive steps are needed, starting from integrating branding values into academic documents, expanding the appreciation system, and strengthening internal communication that reaches all levels of the academic community, so that employee branding at STIE Yapan can develop from mere individual awareness to a truly lived and shared institutional culture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This research found that although lecturers and educational staff at STIE Yapan generally understand the importance of employee branding, its implementation remains far from optimal: awareness of the concept is fairly high, yet the appreciation given by the institution does not fully reflect individual contributions, particularly for lecturers, whose role in shaping the campus image is indirect yet highly strategic. Current branding practices also tend to be poorly coordinated focused mainly on HR development activities and extracurricular programs while the internalization of branding values into everyday academic culture remains minimal, further hindered by

time constraints, weak internal communication, and unclear role definitions among stakeholders. The main contribution of this research is demonstrating that the core issue of employee branding at STIE Yapan lies not in a lack of programs, but in the failure to integrate branding values into the mainstream of daily academic life: the strongest branding moments actually occur in the classroom, during academic advising, and in everyday academic interactions, rather than in ceremonial activities. This finding reinforces the argument that the effectiveness of employee branding depends heavily on the readiness of an institution's internal ecosystem, a perspective that complements prior employer branding research, which has largely focused on large institutions or public universities.

For the leadership of STIE Yapan and similar private higher education institutions, these findings point to three operational recommendations: (1) integrating institutional branding values directly into existing academic documents, such as the Semester Learning Plan, academic advising guidelines, and service ethics standards; (2) building a more inclusive and equitable appreciation system that provides equal recognition for scientific publications, teaching innovations, and community service, rather than focusing only on ceremonial activities; and (3) establishing regular internal communication mechanisms, such as semester evaluation forums, so that the role of lecturers and educational staff in institutional branding is understood on an ongoing basis rather than incidentally. This research is limited by its relatively small number of informants (12 people), which

constrains the generalizability of its findings, as well as by its scope, which covers only the perspectives of lecturers and educational staff, without yet exploring those of students or institutional management. Future research is recommended to broaden this informant scope and to consider a quantitative approach that would allow for a more measurable assessment of employee branding's influence on institutional image, job satisfaction, and individual performance.

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