



## Challenges in building a brand image for entrepreneurial-based vocational institutions : a case study of Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

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#### Article history:

Received Oct 9, 2025  
Revised Nov 20, 2025  
Accepted Nov 30, 2025

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#### Keywords:

Brand Image;  
Communication;  
Entrepreneurial;  
Polytechnic;  
Vocational Institution.

In the era of growing competition among higher education institutions, vocational colleges must build a distinctive brand image that highlights entrepreneurship. Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI) in Medan represents a case of how vocational institutions develop an entrepreneurial-based brand identity. Although every institution has its own uniqueness, challenges often arise in communicating it effectively to the public. This study aims to analyze the challenges faced by WBI in shaping an entrepreneurial brand image as a vocational institution. Building such an image requires consistent communication strategies, adequate resources, and public understanding of vocational education. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation involving management, lecturers, and students. The results show that key challenges include limited marketing communication resources, weak integration of entrepreneurial values into promotional messages, and low public awareness of vocational education advantages. External challenges also stem from public perceptions that favor academic universities over polytechnics. Theoretically, this research contributes to higher education branding literature by applying the DRIP Model (Differentiate, Reinforce, Inform, Persuade) to vocational entrepreneurship education. Practically, it offers strategic insights for vocational institutions to design consistent, value-based communication strategies that strengthen competitiveness and stakeholder engagement.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education in Indonesia has become a major focus of the government's agenda to strengthen the competitiveness of national human resources, (Yu, 2024) According to data from the Directorate General of Vocational Education, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, there are 1,062 vocational higher education institutions across Indonesia, of which more than half (51%) or 543 institutions remain unaccredited. This condition illustrates the significant challenges faced by vocational institutions in

maintaining quality standards and building a strong public reputation. In North Sumatra Province, there are 81 vocational institutions, with 41 of them still unaccredited, indicating that institutional quality and public trust in vocational education in the region need further improvement. Meanwhile, findings from the Research and Development Agency of the Ministry of Education and Culture revealed that 58% of parents in Indonesia support vocational education for their children, yet public understanding of its characteristics and advantages remains relatively low. This gap between public support and awareness underscores the challenge of promoting vocational education as an equal and valuable alternative to academic universities.

The government's commitment to developing vocational education is reflected through various revitalization programs and collaborations with industry partners (DUDI), encouraging vocational institutions to innovate in communication and promotional strategies. The increasing number of students enrolled in vocational higher education in 2023 also indicates a growing public interest in applied learning, while simultaneously intensifying competition among institutions to communicate their distinct values and strengths. Consequently, each institution strives to establish a strong brand image to attract prospective students and build credibility within society, (Oppong, 2021).

One such institution is the Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI), a vocational higher education institution located in Medan that implements an entrepreneurship-based curriculum across all study programs. WBI focuses on experiential business learning, industry collaboration, and entrepreneurial mindset development to position itself as an *entrepreneurial campus*, (Rinaldi Muis et al., 2023). However, in developing its entrepreneurial brand image, WBI faces several challenges, including limited human resources in marketing communication, insufficient integration between entrepreneurial values and promotional messages, and inconsistent institutional communication. Externally, the polytechnic also struggles against public perceptions that often regard academic universities as superior, creating psychological barriers to building trust in vocational institutions. Brand image is not merely about logos or slogans it represents the perceived identity, reputation, and emotional connection between an institution and its stakeholders (Keller, 2016a) According to (Fill & Turnbull, 2016) an effective brand communication strategy must deliver messages that *differentiate, reinforce, inform, and persuade*, aligning with the DRIP Model framework.

Brand image is one of the central concepts in marketing that refers to consumers perceptions of a brand, as reflected through associations stored in their memory. According to (Keller, 2016a) in *Strategic Brand Management*, brand image is formed from a variety of information and experiences encountered by consumers either directly through product usage or indirectly through marketing communication, public opinion, and other sources of information. Within the framework of the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, brand image is considered one of the two key components of brand knowledge, alongside brand awareness, (Indrayana, 2024). Together, these components form the foundation for how consumers evaluate and respond to a brand.

This perception gap affects enrollment decisions and undermines the formation of a strong brand image for vocational institutions (Asri et al., 2023). Meanwhile, (Fill & Turnbull, 2016), *Marketing Communications: Discovery, Creation and Conversations* emphasized that effective brand communication requires an integrated strategy such as the DRIP Model (Differentiate, Reinforce, Inform, Persuade) to ensure consistent, informative, and persuasive messages.

Previous studies have shown that the DRIP Model and drip marketing strategies have been widely applied in commercial sectors to strengthen brand communication effectiveness. (Singh & Birdi, 2011) demonstrated that consistent use of drip marketing in the advertising industry successfully built positive brand perceptions and improved customer loyalty by delivering messages that are informative, persuasive, and differentiative. Similarly, (Chancay et al., 2025) found that structured and continuous

communication in social institutions could significantly increase audience engagement and trust. Meanwhile, research on marketing communication within educational institutions has also grown, emphasizing the importance of integrated strategies for building academic reputation and student attraction (Meltareza & Tawaqal, 2023). However, despite the growing body of literature, few studies have specifically explored how the DRIP Model can be operationalized to shape the brand image of entrepreneurial-based vocational institutions. This gap reveals that the integration of marketing communication theory and vocational branding remains underdeveloped, particularly in understanding how the elements of differentiation, reinforcement, information, and persuasion interact to form a strong and credible institutional image. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge that gap by applying the DRIP Model to analyze the internal and external challenges faced by Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI) in developing its entrepreneurial brand image within the context of vocational education.

Previous studies demonstrate that vocational institutions often struggle to communicate their distinctiveness effectively. (Manurung & Harlyn L Siagian, 2021) found that educational institutions tend to emphasize academic achievements rather than organizational identity, leading to weak differentiation. Similarly, (Munir & Toha, 2022) that the lack of coherent communication strategies prevents institutions from building sustainable competitive advantages. Recent works such as (Asri et al., 2023) highlight that branding in vocational education requires continuous alignment between academic content, industrial collaboration, and public engagement to enhance credibility.

Moreover, digital transformation presents both opportunities and challenges. (Aufa & Ferdian, 2024) explain that institutions adopting digital marketing tools such as SEO and social media storytelling can improve their visibility and audience reach. However, (Vikram Bajaj, 2023) emphasizes that online reputation management requires not only technology adoption but also proactive message control to prevent fragmented brand narratives. Within vocational education, (Willyarto & Paramitha, 2023) discovered that many institutions in Indonesia lack consistent digital branding strategies, particularly in connecting industrial competencies with educational promotion.

Against this backdrop, Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI) serves as a relevant case study. Founded in 2018 under the Wilmar Group Foundation, WBI implements an entrepreneurship-based curriculum that integrates business projects, industrial collaboration, and innovation training across all study programs. This distinctive approach positions WBI as an *entrepreneurial campus*, yet challenges persist in translating this identity into a strong and consistent brand image. Preliminary observations indicate fragmented communication among departments, minimal stakeholder engagement, and limited budget allocation for marketing initiatives. These challenges highlight the necessity of re-examining how brand communication is managed within entrepreneurial-based vocational institutions. The DRIP Model provides an appropriate analytical framework to understand the underlying issues that hinder effective brand image formation. By exploring WBI's internal and external challenges, this study aims to bridge theoretical and practical gaps in vocational branding research. Therefore, The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the field of marketing communication and educational branding, and practically to policy design and institutional management for vocational education stakeholders.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a case study approach to explore the challenges in building an entrepreneurial brand image at the Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI). The qualitative approach allows researchers to examine social phenomena in their natural settings and understand participants experiences and

perceptions in depth, (Creswell, 2014). The study follows a chronological framework consisting of four stages: preparation, data acquisition, data analysis, and validation. This sequential process was developed to ensure methodological transparency and scientific reliability (Cronje, 2020). In the preparation stage, the research objectives were formulated based on theoretical and empirical gaps identified from the literature on brand image and communication in vocational education. Research instruments such as interview guides and observation sheets were developed according to the brand association as the elements to build brand image (Sernide Zebua & Agus Sriyanto, 2025) and DRIP model as the communication framework.

## 2.2 Research Context

The research was conducted at Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI), located in Medan, North Sumatra. WBI is a private vocational higher education institution established in 2013 under the Wilmar Group Foundation. The polytechnic focuses on developing an entrepreneurship-based curriculum, emphasizing practical business learning, collaboration with industry partners, and student innovation. The institution represents a relevant case for this study because it actively promotes itself as an *entrepreneurial campus*, yet faces challenges in communicating its distinct identity to the public. A total of 10 informants participated in this study, selected through purposive sampling to ensure data relevance and richness. The informants consisted of three members of WBI's management (Head of Marketing, Academic Director, and Head of Student Affairs) who have over five years of institutional experience, four lecturers actively involved in student business incubation and promotion activities, and three students who had participated in campus marketing events and entrepreneurship programs. These participants were chosen based on their direct involvement in institutional communication, promotional, or branding initiatives, ensuring diverse yet complementary perspectives. The local context of North Sumatra also reflects broader national issues, where according to the Directorate General of Vocational Education (2023), out of 81 vocational institutions in the province, 41 remain unaccredited. This condition highlights the need for stronger communication strategies and quality assurance within vocational education institutions.

## 2.3 Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase of the study focused on data collection, analysis, and validation, carried out from June to August 2024. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and documentation analysis, (Sugiyono, 2007). Key informants were selected using purposive sampling, including WBI management, lecturers, and students involved in marketing and branding activities. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting 45–60 minutes each, and guided by semi-structured questions related to brand communication, entrepreneurial values, and institutional image. Observations were conducted during academic and promotional events to record communication practices, while institutional documents (e.g., brochures, internal reports, and digital content) were analyzed to triangulate the findings. Data analysis followed the interactive model by (Miles B. & Huberman, 1994), which includes three main components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In addition, a thematic analysis procedure was employed, in which interview transcripts were manually coded into categories reflecting internal and external communication challenges. The codes were then clustered into broader themes aligned with the DRIP Model's four elements *Differentiate*, *Reinforce*, *Inform*, and *Persuade* to interpret how communication strategies influence brand image formation. This process allowed for cross-comparison among informants to ensure analytic consistency. To maintain research validity and trustworthiness, this study employed data triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity, (Fryer & Dinsmore, 2020). All participants were provided opportunities to review their interview summaries to confirm accuracy.

Ethical compliance was ensured throughout the study. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained formal permission from WBI's institutional board and secured verbal informed consent from all participants. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was guaranteed by anonymizing personal identifiers and institutional positions. All data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes, in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1 Qualitative Findings

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study on the challenges faced by Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI) in building its entrepreneurial brand image as a vocational higher education institution. The results are derived from interviews, observations, and documentation conducted between June and August 2024, and analyzed thematically using (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase process.

Table 1. The Thematic Analysis Report

Main Category	Theme / Sub-theme	Supporting Evidence (Data Excerpts)	Interpretation
Internal Challenges	1. Limited Human Resources in Marketing Communication	"There are only a few staff members handling promotions, so each department often promotes on its own." – (Interview, WBI Staff)	Lack of centralized communication coordination leads to inconsistent brand messaging.
	2. Weak Integration of Entrepreneurial Values in Communication	Observation showed promotional materials focusing on programs rather than entrepreneurial outcomes.	Branding emphasizes academic information more than entrepreneurial identity, weakening distinctiveness.
	3. Inconsistent Message Across Departments	"Sometimes the marketing content on social media differs from what the academic division communicates." – (Interview, Lecturer)	Misaligned communication across divisions creates confusion and weakens credibility.
External Challenges	4. Low Public Understanding of Vocational Education	"Parents often ask if a polytechnic is equal to a university; they don't really understand the difference." – (Interview, Admission Officer)	Public perception undervalues vocational institutions, limiting trust and interest.
	5. Limited Engagement with Stakeholders	Few partnerships or community-based events observed in 2024 academic year.	Weak external collaboration reduces institutional exposure and stakeholder advocacy.
	6. Resource Constraints in Promotional Activities	Budget allocation for branding remains minimal compared to academic operations.	Financial and logistical limitations hinder sustainable promotional efforts.

Source : Authors' analysis of primary survey data, 2025

The findings demonstrate that WBI's challenges stem from both organizational structure and external environment. Internally, communication fragmentation, lack of specialized personnel, and inadequate integration of entrepreneurial identity weaken the institution's brand consistency. Externally, misperceptions about vocational education and resource limitations restrict WBI's ability to engage audiences effectively. These dual challenges align with the view of (Effah et al., 2023), who found that most higher education struggle to position themselves as equal competitors to universities due to weak communication integration.

### 3.2 Internal Challenges: Organizational and Strategic Barriers

The internal challenges reveal that WBI's communication system is still decentralized. Each department handles its own promotional activities, resulting in a lack of uniformity and message coherence. This finding corresponds to (Fill & Turnbull, 2016) who emphasized that effective brand communication must be integrated across all organizational levels. Furthermore, entrepreneurial values intended as WBI's core differentiation are not yet fully embedded in its communication materials. While the curriculum strongly supports entrepreneurship, its promotional narrative remains program-oriented rather than value-oriented. As a result, the uniqueness of WBI as an entrepreneurial polytechnic is not clearly perceived by the public. This aligns with (Keller, 2016b), who argue that brand identity must consistently reflect the institution's core values to strengthen public association and recall. These internal limitations hinder WBI's ability to effectively implement the *Differentiate* and *Reinforce* aspects of the DRIP Model. Within the CBBE Model, these weaknesses correspond to the *Brand Associations* and *Brand Meaning* dimensions, where value-inconsistent messages hinder emotional connection and stakeholder confidence. Thus, although WBI possesses a strong internal entrepreneurial culture, it lacks the strategic communication infrastructure needed to sustain message coherence and stakeholder engagement.

### 3.3 External Challenges: Organizational and Strategic Barriers

Externally, WBI faces challenges related to public perception, stakeholder engagement, and resource constraints. The widespread misconception that polytechnics offer lower educational quality than universities remains one of the major obstacles in building a strong brand image. This perception gap is consistent with findings by (Asri et al., 2023), who revealed that limited public understanding of vocational higher education leads to weak brand positioning and low community trust in vocational programs. The lack of widespread literacy about the distinctive role of vocational education has caused many potential students and parents to perceive it as a secondary option compared to academic universities. Another external challenge involves limited collaboration with local industries and community partners, which restricts WBI's visibility and credibility. Observations during the study show that most partnerships are short-term or limited to specific events rather than continuous, strategic cooperation. Similar issues were also highlighted by (Mubarok, 2024), who found that vocational institutions in Indonesia often struggle to sustain long-term partnerships with industries, resulting in inconsistent branding and insufficient exposure to potential stakeholders. Moreover, funding constraints further complicate WBI's promotional efforts. Budget priorities tend to favor academic and operational expenditures rather than long-term communication initiatives, making it difficult for the institution to sustain consistent branding campaigns, (Anggraeni & Putri, 2022). These external factors undermine the inform and persuade components of the DRIP Model, which are crucial for influencing audience perception and engagement. Within the CBBE model, such constraints weaken *Brand Response* and *Brand Resonance*, diminishing audience trust and loyalty. In contrast to previous studies that emphasized digital content or promotional design, this study identifies structural and contextual determinants—such as financial limitations, weak industrial collaboration, and enduring public misconceptions—as critical variables shaping the success of vocational branding. The thematic synthesis thus expands existing literature by uncovering the interplay between organizational capability, stakeholder involvement, and societal perception in shaping brand image formation.

### 3.4 Discussion

Compared with previous studies, this research contributes by contextualizing entrepreneurial-based branding challenges within Indonesian vocational higher education. Earlier works, such as (Asri et al., 2023) and (Wilyarto & Paramitha, 2023), emphasized industrial collaboration and digital branding, yet they did not explore the integration of institutional identity and communication structure. This study advances the discussion

by demonstrating that organizational coordination and message integration are equally crucial to brand development. Similarly, (Mubarok, 2024) acknowledged the importance of external collaboration yet failed to examine the strategic alignment between internal communication management and brand coherence. By linking organizational and environmental dimensions, this study advances understanding of how *internal synergy* and *external engagement* jointly sustain brand equity. Internationally, (Purnamasari et al., 2020) and (Šakyatė-Statnickė, 2024) highlight that higher education branding increasingly relies on emotional narratives and value-driven engagement rather than traditional promotional formats. In line with this, the findings suggest that vocational institutions must transition from informational to narrative and experiential branding to communicate their entrepreneurial essence effectively. Theoretically, the findings extend both the DRIP Model and CBBE Model to the field of vocational education. Internal barriers decentralized structure and value fragmentation illustrate the institution's weakness in implementing differentiate and reinforce, while external barriers public misconceptions, limited collaboration, and scarce resources—impede inform and persuade. These dynamics parallel (Keller, 2016a) hierarchy of brand knowledge: *Brand Associations* → *Meaning* → *Response* → *Resonance*. When DRIP communication fails at any stage, corresponding levels of brand equity in the CBBE framework are also weakened. This integrated interpretation positions the DRIP Model as an operational tool to activate CBBE stages within educational branding contexts. In critical comparison, this research diverges from marketing oriented studies that focus merely on campaign performance or message content. It highlights instead that communication structure, resource allocation, and cultural embedding of entrepreneurial values are decisive factors in institutional branding. Hence, this study contributes theoretically by merging two branding frameworks with DRIP and CBBE to explain how communication consistency and stakeholder interaction generate sustainable brand equity for vocational institutions. As the practical implications, the findings provide actionable insights for vocational-education managers and policymakers: (1) Establish centralized communication units to ensure cross-departmental message coherence. (2) Adopt value-driven storytelling to emphasize entrepreneurial identity and differentiate vocational institutions from universities. (3) Develop long-term communication partnerships with industries and communities to reinforce credibility. (4) Allocate specific budgets and training for branding and communication capacity building among academic and administrative staff. These measures can transform fragmented promotional practices into cohesive brand narratives aligned with entrepreneurial values, thereby enhancing stakeholder trust and enrollment appeal. Overall, the study demonstrates that effective entrepreneurial-based branding in vocational education depends not only on creative messaging but also on integrated communication systems and strategic stakeholder collaboration. The dual use of DRIP and CBBE frameworks bridges theoretical and practical gaps and positions this research as a diagnostic model for strengthening brand communication strategies in similar vocational contexts.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the challenges faced by Wilmar Business Indonesia Polytechnic (WBI) in developing its entrepreneurial brand image as a vocational higher education institution using a qualitative descriptive approach and the DRIP Model (Differentiate, Reinforce, Inform, Persuade) as the analytical framework. The findings revealed that WBI faces multifaceted challenges encompassing both internal and external dimensions. Internally, decentralized communication, limited human resources, and weak integration of entrepreneurial values into promotional content lead to inconsistent messaging and a fragmented brand identity. Externally, low public understanding of vocational education, minimal stakeholder engagement, and limited financial resources hinder consistent communication efforts and weaken audience trust. Theoretically, this study contributes to

the development of marketing communication theory in vocational education by extending the application of the DRIP Model beyond commercial settings and integrating it with the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework. The combination of these two models provides a conceptual bridge between communication processes and brand equity formation, emphasizing that coherent, value-based, and audience-oriented communication is essential for strengthening institutional brand identity. This theoretical synthesis enhances the academic relevance of the research by positioning the DRIP Model as a diagnostic tool for evaluating communication effectiveness in entrepreneurial-based vocational institutions. Empirically, the research enriches the literature on vocational branding in Indonesia by identifying how organizational structure, stakeholder engagement, and social perception jointly influence institutional brand image. Practically, the study offers actionable strategies for vocational institutions, including: (1) establishing a centralized communication unit to ensure message coherence, (2) embedding entrepreneurial values into all promotional narratives, (3) enhancing audience segmentation through digital and experiential engagement, (4) formalizing long-term partnerships with industry and communities, and (5) allocating adequate branding resources and training to support sustainable communication practices. This study is limited by its single-case focus on one institution, which may constrain the generalizability of its findings to other vocational contexts. Data collection relied primarily on interviews, observations, and documents, which, while rich in depth, may not capture broader stakeholder perspectives such as alumni, employers, or policymakers. Future research could adopt a comparative multi-case design across several vocational institutions to identify cross-institutional branding patterns. Incorporating quantitative or mixed-method approaches would also help measure the impact of communication integration on brand equity more precisely. Additionally, exploring the role of digital storytelling and AI-driven marketing tools could provide new insights into how vocational institutions can adapt to the evolving landscape of educational communication. In conclusion, this research reinforces that effective entrepreneurial-based branding in vocational education requires not only distinctive institutional identity but also strategic, integrated, and value-driven communication management. By contextualizing the DRIP and CBBE frameworks within the vocational education sector, this study strengthens the academic discourse on educational marketing communication and opens pathways for future research in developing theory and practice that align with Indonesia's mission of cultivating skilled, innovative, and industry-ready human resources.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions that contributed to the completion of this research. Special appreciation is extended to the Politeknik Wilmar Bisnis Indonesia (WBI) for granting permission and providing valuable access to data, information, and institutional support throughout the study.

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