

# **Key Opinion Leadership in Educational Branding: Ary Ginanjar's Communication Strategy in Building the Image of Ary Ginanjar University**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to analyze the role of Key Opinion Leadership (KOL) in educational branding through a review of Ary Ginanjar's communication strategy in building the image of Ary Ginanjar University (UAG). This study uses a qualitative approach with a single case study design. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with university leaders, communication teams, lecturers, students, and alumni, supplemented by observations of institutional communication practices and analysis of official documents and digital content of the university. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of symbolic leadership, value-based branding, and institutional communication alignment. The results show that Ary Ginanjar functions as a brand anchor that transfers personal credibility and value narratives into the university's institutional identity. Opinion leadership is exercised through symbolic leadership, consistency in value framing across communication channels, and alignment between external messages and internal organizational practices. In addition to building an institutional image, this KOL strategy also contributes to the formation of a collective identity among the academic community, particularly students and alumni. However, this study emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing values and communication systems so that university branding does not rely excessively on individual figures. Theoretically and practically, this study enriches the study of educational branding by positioning KOL as a long-term trust architecture in managing the reputation of higher education institutions in the digital era.

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## **1. Introduction**

The contemporary higher education landscape is undergoing a significant transformation characterized by intensified competition not only in academic quality but also in reputation, digital visibility, and public perception (Miotto et al., 2020; Patriche et al., 2025). Universities are no longer positioned merely as institutions of knowledge production, but as strategic brands that must communicate their values, differentiation, and relevance to diverse stakeholders. In this evolving

context, educational branding has emerged as a critical mechanism to foster both emotional and rational engagement through integrated narratives, visual identity, and service experiences (Clark et al., 2020; Farhat et al., 2021; Hong & Hardy, 2024). Simultaneously, the rapid digitalization of communication has shifted institutional branding practices toward social media platforms, which demand speed, consistency, authenticity, and dialogic engagement.

Social media, in particular, has become the main infrastructure for marketing and relations with prospective students (Isaacs & Mulder, 2025; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022), as it allows universities to build more dialogical and personal relationships. However, the dynamics of social media also make the competition for attention even fiercer (Lund, 2019); institutions are not only competing with other universities, but also with a massive flow of public content. An effective communication strategy is a prerequisite for an institution's image to not only be known but also trusted (Letlatsa, 2023). However, the proliferation of digital content has intensified competition for public attention, creating a saturation environment where institutional messages struggle to gain visibility and trust (Nugroho et al., 2025).

As a result, higher education institutions increasingly rely on Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) as strategic message amplifiers who can enhance credibility, humanize institutional narratives, and accelerate brand perception formation. KOLs operate not merely through follower size, but through trust-based relationships, symbolic authority, and the ability to construct meaningful and relatable narratives that resonate with audiences. This phenomenon reflects a broader shift in branding logic—from institutional-centered communication toward relational and trust-based communication architectures. In this setting, KOLs function as bridges between institutional identity and audience experience, transforming abstract organizational values into socially legitimized meanings. Consequently, educational branding is no longer confined to promotional activities but has evolved into a strategic process of building social legitimacy, relational trust, and sustained engagement within an increasingly complex and digitalized communication ecosystem.

The Indonesian higher education context presents a unique yet insufficiently explored setting, where private universities increasingly rely on founder figures or symbolic leaders to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market. The case of Ary Ginanjar University (UAG) is interesting because from the outset, this institution has linked its identity to the public figure Ary Ginanjar Agustian, who is well known in the field of character education and self-development. The institution's profile highlights its legacy of values and concepts of human development that integrate IQ, EQ, and SQ as its main differentiators. This shows that UAG's branding is not solely based on its study programs, but on a "value narrative" personified through its founder. In addition, the institution's digital footprint is also visible on social media platforms such as Instagram, which is used to disseminate information about new student admissions and strengthen brand existence. This presence indicates that university branding is carried out through digital campaign logic that requires concise messaging, consistent visuals, and clear calls to action. In other words, Ary Ginanjar functions as a key opinion leader and brand anchor who provides stability of meaning for the institution's identity. While prior studies acknowledge the importance of reputation and brand image in influencing student choice, they do not sufficiently explain how these perceptions are constructed through opinion leadership mechanisms. The absence of in-depth discussion into how KOLs operate as "trust architects" in educational institutions further highlights the need for a more nuanced and context-sensitive investigation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of Key Opinion Leadership (KOL) in educational branding through a review of Ary Ginanjar's communication strategy in building the image of Ary Ginanjar University (UAG).

## **Literature Review**

The concept of Key Opinion Leadership (KOL) refers to the ability of certain actors to shape public attitudes through reputation, symbolic authority, and psychological relationships with audiences. In digital environments, KOL influence is determined not only by follower size but also by trust quality, message consistency, and the ability to construct meaningful narratives perceived as relevant (González-Mohino et al., 2025; Pozharliev et al., 2022). Contemporary studies highlight that KOLs operate through content creation, storytelling, and interaction management, enabling

audiences to feel engaged rather than passive (Dyatmika et al., 2024; Lu, 2025). In branding contexts, KOLs function as bridges between brand identity and audience experience, humanizing institutional messages. Therefore, KOLs should be understood beyond promotional roles, as instruments of social legitimacy (Le et al., 2025; Pizarro Milian, 2018). In higher education, reputation depends on academic quality, governance, and communication consistency, making KOL alignment crucial to strengthen institutional credibility and avoid reputational dissonance.

In the Indonesian context, the strengthening of private university image is closely linked to how reputation and brand extension influence students' selection intentions (Rizard et al., 2023; Sutejo et al., 2024), particularly within an increasingly competitive higher education market. Empirical evidence confirms that brand reputation plays a critical role in attracting prospective students, requiring institutions to develop differentiation that is both recognizable and communicable (Kethüda, 2024; Lee et al., 2018). In this setting, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) function as cognitive shortcuts, where public evaluation of institutions is shaped through the credibility of figures representing institutional values. Consequently, KOL communication strategies become essential in understanding how reputation signals are constructed and disseminated (Tran & Uehara, 2023). Their relevance is further amplified by the logic of social media communication, which prioritizes interaction, closeness, and dialogue over one-way messaging. Digital platforms enable universities to build communities and sustain engagement (Galioto et al., 2025; Kahu et al., 2024), yet their effectiveness depends on relatable messaging and consistent responses. In this context, KOLs act as catalysts who humanize institutional values and integrate public relations and branding functions seamlessly.

In strategic communication perspective, strong relationships between organizations and stakeholders are built through dialogic communication practices that emphasize listening, responding, and negotiating meaning with audiences (du Plessis, 2018; Pang et al., 2018). Research on dialogic social media highlights that effective stakeholder engagement requires more than the mere presence of official accounts (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Men et al., 2018); it demands precise audience targeting and appropriate message framing to ensure meaningful interaction (Ghods et al., 2024). This principle reinforces that educational branding is fundamentally relational rather than purely visual. In this context, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) play a flexible dialogic role by initiating conversations, stimulating interaction, and transforming passive audiences into active communities. Therefore, analyzing KOLs in university branding requires attention not only to message content but also to how public conversations are managed. Recent developments further emphasize the application of dialogic principles in university public relations (Al-Saify et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2020), demonstrating their increasing relevance for reputation management in digital environments. These studies confirm that institutional reputation is inseparable from the quality of sustained relationships with stakeholders. Within this framework, KOLs function not merely as promotional agents but as relationship architects who shape communication patterns, influence perceptions of openness and responsiveness, and ultimately translate digital engagement into long-term institutional trust.

From a theoretical perspective, higher education branding can no longer be adequately explained through conventional approaches or formal institutional communication; rather, it has shifted towards the formation of a university's image through symbolic, relational and trust-based mechanisms (Liu & Ghasemy, 2025; Melanthiou et al., 2017). However, existing literature still tends to discuss KOLs in the context of commercial marketing (Farivar et al., 2021; Hudders et al., 2021), rather than as architects of long-term trust within educational institutions. Therefore, this study contributes to explaining how KOLs function as mechanisms for building trust, legitimacy, and identity in higher education branding.

Authenticity is central to KOL effectiveness, as digital audiences are increasingly sensitive to content perceived as artificial or transactional (Kapitan et al., 2022; Pöyry et al., 2019). Research shows that genuineness strengthens positive attitudes and enhances acceptance of brand messages, requiring KOL strategies to emphasize consistent values, appropriate language, and transparent intentions. In educational branding—where decisions involve long-term consequences—trust standards are significantly higher, making authenticity a critical foundation.

Moreover, the rise of virtual KOLs or AI influencers introduces new ethical and strategic complexities, particularly regarding trust and legitimacy. In higher education, this underscores that KOL selection must align with institutional values and consider long-term reputational implications.

## **2. Methods**

### **Research Design and Approach**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, as the research focus is directed at an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of opinion leadership (key opinion leadership) in the context of educational branding. A case study was chosen to comprehensively explore the communication strategies implemented by Ary Ginanjar as a central figure in building the image of Ary Ginanjar University (UAG). This approach allows researchers to explore the processes, meanings, and dynamics of the relationship between KOL figures, institutions, and audiences in a contextual and holistic manner. A single case study was used because UAG has a unique characteristic, namely the direct link between the identity of the institution and its founder as a thought leader. Thus, this study does not aim for statistical generalization, but rather analytical generalization in the development of educational branding and strategic communication theory.

### **Research Location and Context**

This research was conducted at Ary Ginanjar University (UAG), Indonesia, as the main location of the case study. UAG was chosen because it explicitly integrates the values, vision, and narrative of character development personified through the figure of Ary Ginanjar Agustian. In addition to the physical campus environment, the research context also includes digital spaces, particularly social media platforms and official university communication channels used in branding strategies. By including digital spaces as part of the research context, this study is able to capture KOL communication practices more comprehensively, both in the institutional and public spheres. This approach is in line with the nature of contemporary educational branding, which is hybrid between offline and online spaces.

### **Research Informants**

Research informants were determined using purposive sampling, with criteria for informants who had direct involvement and in-depth knowledge related to UAG's communication and branding strategies. The main informants included: (1) university leaders or strategic management teams involved in formulating institutional branding policies, (2) university communication or marketing teams that manage UAG's public messages and channels, and (3) academics (lecturers or educational staff) who understand the positioning of institutional values. In addition, supporting informants included students and alumni who were directly exposed to Ary Ginanjar's communication narrative as a KOL figure. Informants were selected to obtain diverse and complementary perspectives, enabling triangulation of data sources.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured to explore the informants' perceptions of Ary Ginanjar's role as a KOL, the communication strategies used, and their impact on the university's image. Observations were conducted both directly on campus and virtually in digital communication activities, including social media posts, videos, and public interactions. Document analysis covered institutional documents (vision-mission, university profile, promotional materials), social media content, and relevant public communication archives. This combination of techniques allowed researchers to capture rich and contextual empirical data.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis with an interactive approach. The analysis process began with data reduction through open coding to identify initial themes related to opinion leadership, communication strategies, and institutional image formation. Next, axial coding is

performed to connect these themes into more conceptual categories. The final stage involves drawing conclusions and thematic interpretations to build a theoretical understanding of the role of KOLs in educational branding. The analysis process is cyclical and reflective, allowing for refinement of meaning as more data is added.

### **Data Validity Techniques**

Data validity was maintained through several strategies, namely source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing data from various informants to ensure consistency of findings. Technique triangulation is applied by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member checking is carried out by confirming preliminary findings with key informants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation. In addition, the researcher also applies an audit trail by systematically documenting the entire research process to increase the transparency and dependability of the research.

### **3. Results**

Interviews with university leaders showed that Ary Ginanjar was consciously positioned as a representation of the institution's values and identity in the branding strategy of Ary Ginanjar University (UAG). Informants emphasized that since its inception, UAG was not designed as a conventional university, but as an institution with a mission of character building and values-based leadership. The figure of Ary Ginanjar is considered to have strong symbolic legitimacy due to his track record in national character education. This makes his role not only as a founder, but also as a key opinion leader who shapes public perception of the university.

*"UAG is synonymous with Mr. Ary, because the values he has built over many years have become the DNA of this university" (interview results).*

From the perspective of the strategic management team, the interview results revealed that UAG's branding communication is inseparable from the personal narrative of Ary Ginanjar as a thought leader. Informants explained that institutional messages are consistently aligned with the concepts of ESQ and value-based leadership. This strategy is considered effective because the public already knew Ary Ginanjar before they knew his institution. Thus, the university's branding works through a mechanism of value transfer from the figure to the institution.

Interviews with the university's communications team showed that Ary Ginanjar plays an active role in strengthening the framing of institutional messages, even though he is not involved in daily technical operations. Informants explained that the direction of the grand narrative remains rooted in Ary Ginanjar's values and perspectives on education and leadership. This gives the institution's communications a strong ideological consistency, even though they are packaged by different teams. Message consistency is considered the key to the success of UAG's image building in the public eye.

*"The UAG brand was not built from scratch, but from the trust that already existed in Mr. Ary's figure. We always refer to Mr. Ary's values so that the university's message does not lose its spirit" (interview results).*

Observations of public communication activities show that the figure of Ary Ginanjar often appears in various promotional materials and institutional narratives, both explicitly and implicitly. His presence is not always in the form of direct promotion of the university, but rather through narratives of leadership, motivation, and character development that are in line with UAG's positioning. This strategy creates the impression that the university is an extension of the ideas and values that have long been championed by this figure. Observations also show that audiences are more responsive to content that links Ary Ginanjar's personal values with UAG's educational vision. This pattern reinforces the role of KOLs in building the institution's image indirectly but persuasively.

Documentation in the form of social media content and official publications shows that UAG's branding emphasizes a narrative of values rather than superior facilities or academic rankings. Promotional materials feature keywords such as character, leadership, integrity, and meaning of life as key differentiators. This narrative is in line with the messages that Ary Ginanjar has been conveying on various public platforms. This harmony indicates a strategic integration between personal branding and institutional branding. An informant confirmed,

Interviews with UAG lecturers reveal that Ary Ginanjar's presence as a central figure also influences organizational culture and academic practices. The informant stated that the values conveyed in public communications are also internalized in learning activities and campus interactions. This creates harmony between the external image and the internal experience of the academic community. Lecturers view Ary Ginanjar as a symbol of shared values that unify the institution's identity.

*"We don't sell the campus as a building, but as a way of life. What Mr. Ary conveys to the public is also what we feel on campus. I believe in this campus because I believe in the values that Mr. Ary teaches" (interview results).*

From the students' perspective, the interview results show that the figure of Ary Ginanjar is one of the factors that shapes their initial perception of UAG. Several students stated that they first learned about the university through its founder before learning about its academic programs. This shows the strong influence of KOLs in shaping brand awareness. Students also associate the reputation of a figure with the credibility of an institution. Observations of public interactions on social media show that content linking Ary Ginanjar with UAG receives a higher level of engagement than purely institutional content. Audience comments tend to highlight the values, inspiration, and trust in the figure, rather than the administrative aspects of the university. This pattern shows that the audience processes branding messages through emotional affiliation with KOL figures. In other words, the legitimacy of the institution is strengthened by the personal legitimacy of its founding figure. These findings confirm the function of KOL as a trust amplifier in educational branding.

The documentation also shows that UAG rarely uses aggressive promotional approaches in its public communications. Instead, the institution relies more on educational and reflective narratives that are in line with Ary Ginanjar's communication style. This strategy creates a more humanistic and meaningful image of the university compared to institutions that emphasize academic competition alone. This approach reinforces UAG's positioning as a value-based university. One informant stated, "We don't want to look like we're selling, but rather inviting people to understand our educational vision" (interview results).

Interviews with the marketing team revealed that Ary Ginanjar's presence as a KOL provides strategic advantages in building brand differentiation. The informant mentioned that the university did not need to build credibility from scratch because the founder already had a broad base of public trust. However, they also realized the importance of maintaining consistency and authenticity so that the institution's image did not depend excessively on a single figure. This shows strategic awareness in managing the relationship between personal branding and institutional branding.

*"Mr. Ary's figure is a strength, but it must be managed wisely. A source stated. Mr. Ary's values are not slogans, but guidelines for the institution" (interview results).*

Observations of institutional activities show that Ary Ginanjar's presence at strategic university events has high symbolic value. His presence is perceived as strengthening the legitimacy and commitment to institutional values. Even when he is not physically present, messages referring to his thoughts are still used as the main reference. This shows that opinion leadership is symbolic and sustainable. These findings show that KOLs do not always have to be physically present to remain influential. From an analysis of policy documents and the university's vision and mission, it was found that the language and concepts used are very consistent with Ary Ginanjar's public narrative. Institutional documents reflect value orientation, meaning of life, and transformational

leadership. This consistency shows that UAG's branding is not cosmetic but integrated into the institutional policy framework. This reinforces the finding that KOL communication strategies operate at a structural level, not just a communicative one. Interviews with alumni show that the university's image, built through the figure of Ary Ginanjar, has an impact on the personal identity of graduates. Alumni feel that they carry the institution's values as part of their professional and social identity. This shows that KOL-based branding not only influences external perceptions but also shapes the internal identity of stakeholders. Thus, KOL functions as a shaper of the institution's collective identity.

Overall, the results of interviews, observations, and documentation show that Ary Ginanjar's communication strategy as a key opinion leader plays a significant role in building the image of Ary Ginanjar University. Opinion leadership is carried out through consistency of values, personal narratives, and cross-channel communication integration. KOL figures serve as sources of legitimacy, trust enhancers, and institutional meaning makers. These findings confirm that KOL-based educational branding is not only strategic but also ideological and relational. Thus, KOLs are key elements in building the university's identity and reputation in a sustainable manner.

#### **4. Discussion**

The finding that Ary Ginanjar is positioned as the core identity of the university indicates the practice of brand anchoring, where educational institutions link their image to figures who already have public reputation equity. In the context of higher education branding, this strategy is effective because the public often uses symbolic figures as cognitive shortcuts in assessing the quality of an institution. When a university associates itself with a credible figure, the process of building trust is faster and more affective. However, recent literature emphasizes that the success of this strategy depends on the consistency of values between the figure and the institution (Arora et al., 2021; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Inconsistencies can trigger identity dissonance and weaken institutional reputation.

The borrowed credibility mechanism evident in the research findings shows how institutions utilize the personal legitimacy of KOL figures to strengthen their organizational image. Credibility that has been established in the public sphere is borrowed and converted into trust in educational institutions. Contemporary branding studies refer to this practice as effective in the context of competitive markets and asymmetric information. However, converting personal credibility to institutional credibility requires strengthening the communication system so that it does not stop at the persona alone. Institutions need to build narrative and experiential structures that can sustain this credibility. This is consistent with findings that organizational credibility significantly outweighs leader personal credibility in influencing customer support, suggesting institutional credibility requires more than personal credibility alone (Hati & Idris, 2019).

The finding that Ary Ginanjar is not directly involved in communication operations but remains a key reference point indicates the practice of symbolic leadership. Opinion leadership in this context works through ideas, values, and narratives, rather than through day-to-day technical control. Strategic communication literature refers to this pattern as a form of symbolic leadership that is effective in maintaining brand identity stability. When values become the center of control, institutions have consistent ideological guidelines in responding to the dynamics of public communication (McNaughtan et al., 2019).

The high level of audience engagement with content that links KOL figures to institutions shows the strong relational dimension in message reception. The audience not only responds to the content of the message but also to the figure delivering the message, whom they trust emotionally. Collins et al. (2018) found a bi-directional relationship where people adjust message impact based on perceived source reliability while simultaneously revising beliefs about source reliability based on message content. In educational branding, this emotional involvement can accelerate the formation of brand image and awareness. However, high engagement needs to be followed by strengthening institutional understanding so that it does not stop at attraction to the figure.

UAG's orientation, which emphasizes life values over facility promotion, reflects a value-based educational branding strategy. In an increasingly homogeneous higher education landscape, value-

based differentiation is a strategic alternative for building a unique identity. Values as a brand proposition enable universities to build moral and ideological closeness with their audience. However, values also demand high consistency between message and practice so as not to cause public skepticism. This is where the role of KOLs becomes important as guardians of continuity of meaning. Kim & Rim (2024) identified “consistency” as one of six effective CSR communication elements that significantly reduce skepticism toward organizational altruism

The institution's awareness not to rely excessively on figures demonstrates an understanding of the risks of single-person brand dependency. Reputation management literature warns that extreme dependence on a single figure can be a strategic vulnerability. Fournier & Eckhardt (2019) document specific vulnerabilities in person-brands: mortality, hubris, unpredictability, and social embeddedness—all factors that can destabilize brand value. Moreover, Giertz et al. (2022) identify “relationship hijacking,” where human brands can monopolize consumer relationships with corporate brands, severely impairing engagement. Therefore, institutionalizing values is an important step in maintaining a sustainable image. Establishing a community of values among lecturers, students, and alumni can reduce this risk. In addition, systematic content management helps maintain message consistency.

The cross-channel narrative coherence found in this study reflects omnichannel branding practices. In the university context, cross-channel consistency helps the public build a stable understanding of institutional identity. When value messages are present in official documents, social media, and campus activities, the image becomes more credible. Strategic communication literature emphasizes that message fragmentation is one of the causes of weak digital reputation. Therefore, cross-channel integration is a prerequisite for successful educational branding. These findings are consistent with research on integrated university communication.

The dialogic function reinforced by KOLs shows that reputation is built through relationships, not just exposure. Social media enables two-way communication that strengthens a sense of closeness and trust. However, effective dialogue requires an institutional response system so that it does not stop at symbolic interaction. KOLs can spark dialogue, but institutions must be able to manage it sustainably. This confirms that KOLs are not a substitute for communication systems, but rather a reinforcement of them.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study concludes that Key Opinion Leadership (KOL) constitutes a critical strategic mechanism in shaping higher education branding, particularly when institutional identity is deeply anchored in a figure possessing strong symbolic legitimacy and pre-existing reputational capital. The case of Ary Ginanjar University demonstrates that KOL functions not merely as a promotional instrument, but as a brand anchor and meaning-maker that facilitates the transfer of personal values, credibility, and ideological narratives into a coherent institutional identity. The findings reveal that the effectiveness of this strategy lies in the consistency of value-based communication, the enactment of symbolic leadership, and the integration of messages across multiple communication channels, which collectively construct a stable, authentic, and trust-based public perception. Furthermore, this study extends the theoretical understanding of educational branding by positioning KOL as an architecture of long-term trust, where reputation is built through relational engagement, narrative coherence, and the internalization of values within the academic community. However, the study also highlights a critical strategic implication: the sustainability of KOL-driven branding depends on the institution's ability to institutionalize values and develop robust communication systems that transcend individual dependency. Therefore, this research contributes to both theory and practice by offering a nuanced explanation of how KOL operates as a strategic, ideological, and relational force in contemporary higher education branding, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of balancing personal influence with organizational resilience.

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