



TADBIR: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam

P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

Vol. 14. No. 3. Oktober, 2026, Hal: 819-835

DRIVERS AND BARRIERS OF BRANDING STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION IN AN ISLAMIC SECONDARY SCHOOL: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis faktor pendukung dan penghambat implementasi strategi branding pada madrasah tsanawiyah berbasis pesantren dengan studi kasus di MTs Darul Arifin Kabupaten Muaro Jambi. Dalam konteks persaingan lembaga pendidikan yang semakin ketat, madrasah dituntut untuk mengelola branding secara strategis tanpa mengabaikan identitas keislaman yang dimilikinya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi yang melibatkan kepala madrasah, pimpinan administrasi, guru, serta staf terkait. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi branding didukung oleh kepemimpinan yang visioner, kejelasan identitas lembaga melalui program unggulan seperti tahfidz Al-Qur'an dan pembelajaran kitab kuning, dukungan kelembagaan, serta pemanfaatan media digital secara aktif. Adapun faktor penghambat utama meliputi keterbatasan sumber daya manusia dalam bidang komunikasi digital dan persepsi masyarakat yang masih memandang madrasah berbasis pesantren sebagai lembaga pendidikan tradisional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa branding akan efektif apabila diintegrasikan ke dalam manajemen lembaga dan praktik pendidikan secara nyata, didukung oleh kepemimpinan strategis, pengembangan kapasitas, dan komunikasi yang autentik. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dan praktis bagi pengembangan manajemen branding pendidikan Islam, khususnya dalam merumuskan strategi yang mengintegrasikan nilai keislaman dengan tuntutan komunikasi kelembagaan di era digital, serta menjadi rujukan bagi pengelola madrasah berbasis pesantren dalam menyusun kebijakan branding yang berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: Branding Pendidikan, Madrasah Tsanawiyah, Kepemimpinan, Studi Kasus Kualitatif, Manajemen Pendidikan.



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the drivers and barriers of branding strategy implementation in an Islamic secondary school, using an Islamic boarding-school-based madrasah tsanawiyah in Muaro Jambi Regency as a case study. In an increasingly competitive educational environment, Islamic schools are required to manage institutional branding strategically while maintaining their religious identity. This research employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving the head of the madrasah, administrative leaders, teachers, and relevant staff. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal that branding implementation is strongly supported by visionary leadership, a clear institutional identity grounded in flagship programs such as Qur'an memorization and classical Islamic learning, organizational support, and active use of digital media. Conversely, branding effectiveness is constrained by limited human resource capacity in digital communication and persistent public perceptions that associate pesantren-based schools with traditional education. The study concludes that branding in Islamic secondary schools functions effectively when it is integrated into institutional management and educational practices rather than treated as a purely promotional activity. Strategic leadership, capacity development, and authentic communication are essential for sustaining branding effectiveness and strengthening public trust. This research contributes both theoretically and practically to the development of branding management in Islamic education, particularly in formulating strategies that integrate Islamic values with institutional communication demands in the digital era, and serves as a reference for pesantren-based madrasah administrators in designing sustainable branding policies.

Keywords: *Educational Branding, Islamic Secondary School, Leadership, Qualitative Case Study, Educational Management.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, educational institutions have increasingly operated within a competitive environment characterized by market orientation, public accountability, and heightened parental expectations. Schools and madrasahs are no longer evaluated solely based on curriculum delivery but also on how effectively they communicate institutional identity, educational quality, and value propositions to the public. In this context, branding has emerged as a strategic management tool that enables educational institutions to differentiate themselves, build trust, and strengthen stakeholder engagement.



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For Islamic secondary schools, branding presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, Islamic schools possess strong value-based identities rooted in religious traditions, moral education, and character development. On the other hand, they often face persistent public perceptions that associate them with traditionalism, limited innovation, and restricted relevance to contemporary educational demands. As a result, Islamic schools are required to strategically manage branding in ways that preserve religious authenticity while responding to modern expectations.

Branding in education should not be understood merely as promotional activity, but rather as an integrated managerial strategy that aligns institutional vision, leadership, programs, and communication practices. Effective branding is shaped by internal drivers such as leadership commitment, organizational culture, program distinctiveness, and resource availability, as well as by external conditions including public perception, competition, and societal expectations.¹

In Islamic educational institutions, leadership legitimacy, religious authority, and moral credibility play a crucial role in shaping institutional branding. However, branding implementation may be constrained by limited human resources, insufficient digital competencies, and deeply rooted societal stereotypes about pesantren-based education. Understanding how these drivers and barriers interact is essential for ensuring that branding strategies contribute meaningfully to institutional sustainability and educational quality rather than remaining symbolic or superficial.

Although educational branding has been extensively researched in various contexts, significant gaps remain, particularly when considering faith-based secondary schools such as Islamic madrasahs. Foundational work by Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown² offers a systematic review of higher education marketing and

¹ Samman, A. M. A. (n.d.). *The Power of Branding in Higher Education: A Review of Best Practices and Cases*; Syaebani, M. I., Muthia, S. R., & Primadini, D. V. (2022). Internal Brand Management and Its Effects on Employees' Attitude in an Indonesian Airline Company. *Jurnal Manajemen dan Bisnis Sriwijaya*, 19(3), 177–190; Thang, P. D., & Phong, H. N. (2022). Digital Transformation in Branding Building for Vietnam Higher Education Industry. *International Research Journal of Engineering, IT & Scientific Research*, 8(4), 139–143; Wahyunto, M., Hidayati, D., & Sukirman, S. (2024). Strategi Branding Sekolah di Era Digital dalam Meningkatkan Animo Masyarakat Melalui Pemanfaatan Digital Marketing. *Academy of Education Journal*, 15(2); Zulfa, H., Sujianto, A. E., & Mutohar, P. M. (2024). Educational Leadership as the Primary Force in Attracting Islamic Education Customers. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 2(3), 274–287.

² Oplatka, I., & Hemsley-Brown, J. (2021). A Systematic and Updated Review of the Literature on Higher Education Marketing 2005–2019. In Z. Sinuany-Stern (Ed.), *Handbook of Operations Research and Management Science in Higher Education* (Vol. 309, pp. 35–80). Springer International Publishing.



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branding, emphasizing how institutional reputation and marketing influence student choices, yet the study is situated primarily within universities and higher education systems, leaving a gap in secondary and faith-based contexts where community values and religious identity intersect with branding strategies. Similarly, Chapleo³ explores internal brand management in the university sector, focusing on leadership alignment and organizational value creation; however, this research does not address value-based institutions such as Islamic schools, where identity is deeply rooted in religious teachings and character formation, a dimension absent from mainstream branding literature. Research by Maringe and Gibbs⁴ contributes to our understanding of marketing and branding in competitive educational marketplaces, but their findings are largely drawn from Western contexts and conventional schools, limiting the direct applicability to Islamic educational environments. Taken together, these three studies establish the theoretical foundation of educational branding, yet none examines how branding is negotiated within a religiously grounded, community-embedded institution such as a pesantren-based madrasah.

Meanwhile, studies conducted in the Indonesian Islamic education context begin to narrow this gap. Munawwaroh and Rahayu⁵ discuss digital branding practices in Islamic boarding schools, emphasizing the use of online tools and platforms, yet they do not sufficiently examine the organizational drivers and structural barriers that affect branding effectiveness, such as leadership capacity or community perception. Meanwhile, Atin, Fitriyati, and Shaleh⁶ highlight strategic and managerial challenges in building public trust toward madrasah branding, including issues related to community perception and resource constraints, but stop short of linking these structural challenges directly with the day-to-day operational processes of branding implementation. Taking a position among these three strands of research—higher-education-centred branding theory, digital-practice-oriented pesantren studies, and trust-building perspectives—this study argues that what remains unaddressed is precisely how internal drivers and external barriers interact at the operational and leadership level of a single Islamic secondary school. This is

³Chapleo, C. (2011). Exploring Rationales for Branding a University: Should We Be Seeking to Measure Branding in UK Universities? *Journal of Brand Management*, 18(6), 411–422.

⁴Maringe, F., & Gibbs, P. (2009). *Marketing Higher Education: Theory and Practice*. Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education.

⁵Munawwaroh, Z., & Rahayu, P. (2024). Digital Marketing Strategies for Enhancing Branding in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Comprehensive Analysis. *Tarbawi: Jurnal Keilmuan Manajemen Pendidikan*, 10(2), 199–208.

⁶Atin, S., Fitriyati, I., & Shaleh, S. (2023). Strategi Branding Image Madrasah untuk Membangun Trust Masyarakat. *At-Ta'lim: Media Informasi Pendidikan Islam*, 22(1), 83–96.



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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the specific urgency that the present study responds to: existing literature explains what branding should look like and what tools it may use, but not how a pesantren-based madrasah actually navigates the tension between visionary leadership, limited resources, and public perception in practice. Collectively, these studies indicate that while branding has been widely discussed across educational contexts, empirical research remains limited on how internal drivers and external barriers specifically shape the implementation of branding strategies in Islamic secondary schools, particularly at operational and leadership levels, a gap this study seeks to address.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to analyze the drivers and barriers of branding strategy implementation in an Islamic secondary school context, using a pesantren-based madrasah tsanawiyah as a case study. Specifically, the study seeks to: identify key internal and external factors that support branding strategy implementation; examine major constraints that hinder effective branding practices; and explore how Islamic secondary schools can strategically manage branding to enhance public trust and institutional sustainability.

By focusing on this case, this study contributes to the field of educational management by offering context-sensitive insights into branding practices within Islamic schooling, thereby enriching both theoretical discourse and practical policy considerations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the drivers and barriers of branding strategy implementation in an Islamic secondary school. A qualitative design was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex social and organizational phenomena within their real-life context, as Creswell⁷ argues that qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand meanings, perspectives, and processes rather than measure variables statistically. The case study approach further allows researchers to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its natural setting, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident; Yin⁸ states that a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context. Accordingly, an Islamic secondary school that integrates pesantren-based education with formal schooling

⁷Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

⁸Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications, p. 15.



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in Muaro Jambi Regency was selected as a single case because it actively implements branding strategies amid institutional and societal challenges. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in branding and institutional management, including the head of the madrasah, the head of administration, teachers, and staff responsible for communication and public relations.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations regarding branding practices, supporting factors, and obstacles encountered during implementation. Observation was used to examine how branding values were reflected in daily institutional practices, while documents such as school profiles, social media content, and institutional reports were analyzed to triangulate findings. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña⁹, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification; this model allows continuous interaction between data collection and analysis, ensuring that emerging patterns and themes are systematically refined.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings below are organized according to the three data sources used in this study in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis and were processed through the data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing stages of the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model. Interview data primarily generated participants' perceptions of drivers and barriers; observation data verified how these perceptions were reflected in daily institutional practice; and document analysis (school profiles, social media content, and institutional reports) triangulated both sources. The presentation below moves from supporting factors, to inhibiting factors, to the school's strategic responses, followed by a discussion of theoretical and practical implications, reflecting the sequence in which themes emerged during data reduction and display.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Branding Strategy Implementation

This study reveals that the implementation of branding strategies at the case-study madrasah is influenced by a combination of strong internal drivers and persistent structural barriers. The findings indicate that branding in an Islamic secondary school context is not merely a technical or promotional activity, but a

⁹Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.



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managerial and cultural process embedded within leadership practices, institutional identity, and community relations. Across all four supporting factors discussed below, the interview, observation, and documentation data consistently converged, which strengthens the credibility of the pattern rather than reflecting an isolated or single-source impression.

One of the most significant supporting factors identified through interviews and corroborated by observation is strong leadership and institutional commitment. The head of the madrasah and the pesantren caretaker play a central role in defining and sustaining the branding vision of the school. Leadership is not limited to administrative control, but extends to moral authority, symbolic representation, and strategic direction. The presence of a respected pesantren caretaker enhances institutional legitimacy and strengthens public trust, making branding messages more credible and persuasive. Participants across interviews repeatedly framed the caretaker's authority not as a marketing asset that is deliberately deployed, but as a pre-existing source of trust that branding communication subsequently channels outward, a distinction that separates religious-authority-based branding from the more transactional forms of leadership branding typically discussed in corporate literature.

This finding resonates with, yet also extends, Chapleo's¹⁰ argument that leadership alignment is a prerequisite for a coherent institutional brand. Chapleo's work, situated in UK universities, treats leadership primarily as a coordinating function that aligns internal stakeholders around a brand promise. In the case examined here, leadership performs an additional function that is largely absent from the university-branding literature: it supplies moral and religious legitimacy that makes the brand credible to a community for whom formal marketing claims alone would not be persuasive. This is consistent with findings from Aziz, Naim, Kartika, and Miftahussurur¹¹, who show that in Islamic secondary education, branding becomes durable when it is anchored in a participatory quality culture led from the top, rather than treated as a communications exercise delegated to junior staff. Similarly, Sholikah, Syukur, and Junaedi¹² found that in coastal Islamic higher education institutions, brand strength was inseparable from the personal

¹¹Aziz, S., Naim, N., Kartika, A. R., & Miftahussurur, W. (2025). Quality and Identity in Islamic Education Branding: Exploring Quality, Culture, and Sustainability. *Fenomena: Journal of the Social Sciences*, 24(2), 241–254.

¹²Sholikah, S., Syukur, F., & Junaedi, M. (2021). *Islamic Higher Education Branding in the Coastal Area Perspective of Hermawan Kartajaya's PDB Triangle Theory*. STAIN Kudus.



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credibility of institutional leaders, reinforcing the pattern observed in the present case.

Another key supporting factor, evident in both interview accounts and document analysis of institutional profiles, is the clarity of institutional identity through flagship programs. Programs such as Qur'an memorization (Tahfidz), classical Islamic text learning (Kitab Kuning), Madrasah Diniyah, and foreign language development function as core identity markers that differentiate the school from other educational institutions. These programs are not only promoted symbolically but are consistently implemented in daily educational practices, as confirmed through direct observation, contributing to authentic branding. This lived, practice-based nature of the branding is important: rather than being announced through slogans, the identity is demonstrated through the rhythm of the students' daily schedule, which observation data captured directly, recitation circles, memorization targets displayed on classroom walls, and the visible presence of the Kitab Kuning curriculum in the timetable.

This finding is consistent with Hilmi, Nasir, Saparudin, Dahlan, and Saharudin¹³, who found that Tahfidz Al-Qur'an functions as a distinct brand image for modern Islamic education in a separate regional context, suggesting that this program is not unique to the case examined here but represents a broader pattern in Indonesian Islamic secondary education of using memorization achievement as a differentiating identity marker. It also aligns with Halili and Rizquha¹⁴, who observed that pesantren branding is strengthened when specialization programs are used to sharpen a distinctive institutional profile rather than attempting to compete on generic educational quality claims. Taken together, these parallels suggest that flagship-program-based identity is a recurring mechanism across Islamic educational institutions, though the present study adds that its credibility depends on the consistency between what is promoted and what is observably practiced day to day.

Organizational support also plays an important role. The availability of formal accreditation, adequate facilities, structured funding mechanisms, and foundation support strengthens the institutional image and reassures parents regarding educational quality. In addition, document analysis of the madrasah's social media platforms and official website shows that active use of digital media serves as a strategic tool for transparency, communication, and public engagement.

¹³Hilmi, M., Nasir, M. A., Saparudin, S., Dahlan, F., & Saharudin, S. (2023). *Tahfiz Al-Qur'an as Brand Image of Modern Islamic Education in Lombok*. IAI Sunan Giri Ponorogo.

¹⁴Halili, M., & Rizquha, A. (2020). Branding Pesantren Preuner dalam Memperkuat Identitas Pesantren. *Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam (JUMPA)*, 1(2), 1–12.



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Through consistent documentation of academic activities, student achievements, and social programs, the madrasah reinforces its branding narrative with visible evidence. Interview participants described this digital documentation less as promotional content and more as a form of institutional accountability directed at parents, a framing that shapes how the content is produced and how frequently it is updated.

This pattern is consistent with Nurhayati, Annur, and Baharuddin¹⁵, who describe religious identity itself as functioning as a branding instrument when it is communicated consistently through institutional channels, rather than treated merely as a curricular attribute. It also parallels Elsa and Sakinah¹⁶, who found that school branding management strengthens competitiveness when institutional identity, superior programs, and digital literacy are developed together rather than as separate initiatives. The present case demonstrates a similar integration: digital media is not used as a stand-alone marketing channel but as an extension of the same institutional identity that is built through leadership and flagship programs.

These findings support Kotler and Fox's¹⁷ argument that effective educational branding relies on internal alignment, leadership commitment, and consistent communication with stakeholders. In this case, branding functions as a strategic management instrument rather than a superficial marketing effort. What the present findings add to Kotler and Fox's largely generic framework is specificity about what *internal alignment* means in a religiously grounded institution: alignment is not simply organizational (between departments or staff roles) but also normative (between the institution's religious identity and its public communication). This distinction matters because it explains why branding strategies transplanted directly from secular or corporate contexts, without attention to religious legitimacy, are unlikely to succeed in a pesantren-based setting.

Inhibiting Factors of Branding Implementation

Despite these strengths, interview data also identify several inhibiting factors that constrain branding effectiveness. The most prominent barrier is the limited capacity of human resources, particularly in digital branding and

¹⁵Nurhayati, N., Annur, S., & Baharuddin, B. (2025). Islamic Education Service Marketing Management Based on ISMUBA Identity as a Strategy to Strengthen Customer Loyalty in the Era of Industrial Revolution 4.0. *An-Nidzam: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan dan Studi Islam*, 10(2), 1–23.

¹⁶Elsa, & Sakinah, N. (2026). Strategi School Branding Management dalam Meningkatkan Daya Saing Sekolah di Era Kompetisi Pendidikan. *AKSI: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 4(2), 133–145.

¹⁷Kotler, P., & Fox, K. F. A. (1995). *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions* (2nd ed.). Prentice Hall.



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communication. Branding activities largely depend on a small number of individuals who lack formal training in digital media management, resulting in inconsistent content production and limited strategic planning, a pattern also visible in the irregular posting frequency found during document analysis of the school's social media accounts. Several participants noted that branding-related tasks are frequently assigned as an additional duty to teaching staff who already carry a full teaching load, rather than to a dedicated communication function, which limits both the volume and the strategic consistency of content produced.

This constraint mirrors findings from Sumardi, Mahmudah, Abbas, and Suparman¹⁸, who identified limited managerial capacity as a persistent barrier to sustaining branding momentum in pesantren-based institutions even where community reputation is otherwise strong, and from Falah, Muchlisin, Indriyani, Ulyahimawati, and Haq¹⁹, who found that pesantren-based schools often possess strong substantive programs but lack the communication capacity to translate them into a coherent public brand image. The convergence of these independent findings across different institutions suggests that the human-resource constraint identified in this study is not idiosyncratic to the case examined, but reflects a structural feature of pesantren-based branding management more broadly, one rooted in staffing models built around teaching rather than institutional communication.

Another major inhibiting factor, raised consistently across interviews, is public perception. Some segments of the community continue to associate pesantren-based madrasahs with traditional, narrowly religious education, which may reduce their attractiveness to parents seeking institutions that balance religious values with modern academic competencies. This perception gap requires continuous effort to reshape public understanding through evidence-based communication rather than symbolic claims. Notably, participants distinguished between perception among the immediate community, where the madrasah's reputation is already well established and perception among prospective parents from outside the immediate area, where stereotypes about pesantren education appear more persistent and harder to shift through digital communication alone.

¹⁸Sumardi, R. A. W., Mahmudah, F. N., Abbas, N., & Suparman, F. M. (2023). Branding Image Strategy in Enhancing the Competitive Advantage of Pondok Pesantren Islamic Center Bin Baz Yogyakarta. *Al-Hikmah: Journal of Education*, 4(1), 107–122.

¹⁹Falah, R. Z., Muchlisin, I., Indriyani, D., Ulyahimawati, V., & Haq, M. M. B. (2023). Strategi Membangun Brand Image Sekolah Berbasis Pesantren (Studi di SMA Syubbanol Wathon Secang Magelang). *Ma'alim: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 4(2), 145–164.



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This finding is in line with Zulfa, Sujianto, and Mutohar²⁰, who argue that educational leadership functions as the primary force capable of shifting public perception toward Islamic institutions, precisely because leadership credibility can counteract stereotypes that promotional content alone cannot resolve. It also reflects the broader argument advanced by Listari, Annur, and Baharuddin²¹ that Islamic educational concepts must be actively and visibly implemented not merely stated in order to function as a credible branding strategy capable of overcoming persistent public stereotypes about religious education.

These challenges reflect broader structural issues commonly faced by Islamic educational institutions, as noted by Atin, Fitriyati, and Shaleh²², including resource constraints and the persistence of societal stereotypes. The findings suggest that branding barriers are not solely technical problems but are deeply connected to organizational capacity and socio-cultural contexts. Read together, the two inhibiting factors identified in this study, human-resource capacity and public perception are not independent of one another: limited communication capacity slows the pace at which evidence-based content can be produced, which in turn slows the rate at which persistent stereotypes can be countered. This suggests that addressing either barrier in isolation is unlikely to be sufficient; the two require a coordinated response.

Strategic Responses to Branding Barriers

In response to these challenges, the madrasah adopts a collaborative and developmental strategy. Branding responsibilities are shared among teachers, administrative staff, and students, reducing dependence on individual expertise. Capacity-building initiatives such as training, workshops, and technical assistance are implemented to improve digital competencies and communication skills. Interview data indicate that this distribution of responsibility is a deliberate response to the human-resource constraint discussed above: rather than waiting to recruit dedicated communication staff, the madrasah has chosen to build baseline digital competency across its existing staff and, in some activities, its students.

²⁰Zulfa, H., Sujianto, A. E., & Mutohar, P. M. (2024). Educational Leadership as the Primary Force in Attracting Islamic Education Customers. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 2(3), 274–287.

²¹Listari, T., Annur, S., & Baharuddin, B. (2026). *Implementasi Konsep Pendidikan Islam dalam Strategi Branding Lembaga Pendidikan*. Manajerial: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam.

²²Atin, Fitriyati, & Shaleh (2023), op. cit.



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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This collaborative and capacity-building approach is consistent with Syaebani, Muthia, and Primadini's²³ observation that internal brand management is strengthened when staff across an organization not only designated marketing personnel, understand and consistently represent the institution's brand values. It also parallels the digital transformation strategies described by Thang and Phong²⁴ and the digital marketing approaches documented by Wahyunto, Hidayati, and Sukirman²⁵, both of which found that structured, incremental capacity development produces more sustainable improvements in branding communication than one-off promotional campaigns. The case examined here suggests that this pattern extends from the higher-education and general-school contexts studied by these authors into the pesantren-based secondary school context as well.

Furthermore, the madrasah emphasizes informative and educational branding content, highlighting real institutional practices, social engagement, and student development outcomes. This approach gradually transforms public perception by allowing stakeholders to directly observe the alignment between branding messages and educational realities. Rather than positioning branding as persuasion, participants consistently described their communication strategy in terms of demonstrating rather than claiming, a choice that appears deliberately calibrated to the religious-authenticity concerns raised in the discussion of inhibiting factors above.

The findings demonstrate that branding strategy implementation in an Islamic secondary school is shaped by the interaction between leadership strength, institutional identity, organizational capacity, and public perception. Supporting factors enable branding to function as a tool for institutional sustainability and quality assurance, while inhibiting factors highlight the need for continuous capacity development and strategic communication.

Importantly, this study shows that branding in Islamic education cannot be separated from values, leadership legitimacy, and community trust. When branding is implemented authentically and supported by strong internal drivers, it contributes

²³Syaebani, M. I., Muthia, S. R., & Primadini, D. V. (2022). Internal Brand Management and Its Effects on Employees' Attitude in an Indonesian Airline Company. *Jurnal Manajemen dan Bisnis Sriwijaya*, 19(3), 177–190.

²⁴Thang, P. D., & Phong, H. N. (2022). Digital Transformation in Branding Building for Vietnam Higher Education Industry. *International Research Journal of Engineering, IT & Scientific Research*, 8(4), 139–143.

²⁵Wahyunto, M., Hidayati, D., & Sukirman, S. (2024). Strategi Branding Sekolah di Era Digital dalam Meningkatkan Animo Masyarakat Melalui Pemanfaatan Digital Marketing. *Academy of Education Journal*, 15(2).



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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not only to increased visibility but also to enhanced educational quality and stakeholder confidence.

Theoretical Implications

Positioned against the literature reviewed in the Introduction, these findings extend rather than simply confirm existing branding theory. Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown's²⁶ review situates branding primarily as a function of institutional reputation and marketing communication within higher education; the present findings suggest that in a faith-based secondary school context, reputation is not built primarily through marketing communication at all, but through the visible, daily consistency between religious identity and educational practice, with communication serving a documentary rather than persuasive function. Similarly, while Maringe and Gibbs²⁷ frame branding as a response to market competition, the present case indicates that competitive pressure alone does not explain why branding succeeds or fails; what matters more is whether the institution's internal moral authority is strong enough to make its public claims credible in the first place.

The study also contributes to the narrower body of Indonesian Islamic education branding literature. Where Munawwaroh and Rahayu²⁸ and Yaqin and Fadilah²⁹ emphasize digital tools and platform selection as the primary lever for improving pesantren branding, the present findings suggest that digital tools are necessary but not sufficient: without the underlying organizational capacity and leadership legitimacy identified in this study, digital branding initiatives risk becoming inconsistent or superficial. This reframes the relationship between digital practice and branding effectiveness as mediated by organizational and leadership factors, rather than direct.

Practical Implications

For madrasah leaders and pesantren administrators, these findings suggest three practical priorities. First, branding responsibility should be distributed and supported with structured training rather than left to individual initiative, given that reliance on a small number of untrained staff was consistently identified as the central capacity constraint. Second, communication content should prioritize documentation of authentic institutional practice, academic activities, flagship programs, and student outcomes, over promotional messaging, since this is what

²⁹Yaqin, M. A., & Fadilah, N. (2024). Strategi Membangun Brand Awareness Melalui Islamic Branding di Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid Wilayah Al-Mawaddah. *Jurnal Nakula: Pusat Ilmu Pendidikan, Bahasa dan Ilmu Sosial*, 2(3), 309–325.



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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participants themselves identified as building credibility with sceptical audiences. Third, institutions seeking to shift persistent public stereotypes should recognize that this is a leadership-dependent, long-term process rather than a communications task that can be resolved through a single campaign or platform.

For policymakers and supervisory bodies overseeing pesantren-based madrasahs, the findings suggest that capacity-building support, particularly in digital communication skills, would address a structural constraint identified consistently across this and comparable studies, rather than a constraint specific to a single institution.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a single-case qualitative study, these findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable; they describe patterns that are plausible and theoretically transferable to institutions with similar characteristics, rather than patterns that can be assumed to hold across all pesantren-based madrasahs. The reliance on interviews, observation, and document analysis conducted within one institution also means that some inhibiting factors, particularly regarding public perception, reflect the perspective of institutional insiders rather than an independent survey of community members themselves, which would be a valuable direction for future research. Future studies employing comparative multi-case designs across madrasahs with differing governance models, resource levels, or geographic settings would help establish which of the drivers and barriers identified here are common structural features of Islamic secondary education branding, and which are specific to the leadership and circumstances of the case examined in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of branding strategies in Islamic secondary schools is fundamentally shaped by the interaction between strong internal drivers and persistent structural barriers. In the case examined, branding effectiveness is primarily supported by visionary leadership, a clearly articulated institutional identity grounded in flagship religious–academic programs, and organizational commitment to consistent communication and transparency. These drivers enable branding to function not merely as a promotional activity, but as an integrated component of educational management and quality assurance.

At the same time, the study identifies significant inhibiting factors, particularly limitations in human resource capacity related to digital branding and the persistence of public perceptions that associate pesantren-based schools with traditional and narrowly religious education. These barriers demonstrate that branding challenges in Islamic education are not purely technical, but are deeply



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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embedded in organizational structures and socio-cultural contexts. These findings directly answer the study's stated objectives: identifying the internal and external factors supporting branding, examining the constraints that hinder it, and explaining how an Islamic secondary school strategically manages branding to build public trust.

This research shows that branding strategies can remain effective when institutions adopt collaborative and developmental approaches, including shared responsibility among staff, capacity-building initiatives, and evidence-based communication that aligns branding messages with authentic educational practices. Such approaches allow Islamic secondary schools to gradually transform public perception while maintaining their religious identity. By highlighting both drivers and barriers of branding implementation, this study contributes to the field of educational management by providing context-sensitive insights into branding practices within Islamic schooling.

For future research and practice, sustainable branding in Islamic secondary education requires strategic leadership, organizational capacity development, and continuous alignment between institutional values and public communication. Future research is encouraged to examine branding dynamics across multiple Islamic schools through comparative or multi-case designs, and to explore the long-term impact of branding strategies on institutional performance, student enrollment, and educational outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the case-study madrasah in Muaro Jambi Regency for their cooperation, openness, and support throughout the research process. Special appreciation is extended to the head of the madrasah, teachers, and administrative staff who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights, which made this study possible.

The authors also gratefully acknowledge UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi for providing financial support for this research. The institutional funding and academic support significantly contributed to the successful completion of the study.



TADBIR: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam

P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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