



Building Trust and Reputation: Branding Strategies of Elite Muslim Schools in Indonesia

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Abstract. This qualitative multi-case study explores the branding strategies of elite Muslim schools in East Java, Indonesia, by interviewing 25 informants consisting of school heads, teachers, and guardians. The study aims to investigate the methods used by school principals to enhance their school's brand internally based on the school's vision and mission, as well as external strategies to increase public trust and attract new students. The results show that schools utilize public relations management by forming a marketing communication team to draw up strategic planning, implementing strategies involving all stakeholders, and evaluating branding based on indicators of success. The branding method is to build a positive image and increase public trust to be known as an elite Muslim school with high costs but still in demand by Muslim people with middle to upper economy. The implication is that branding strategies are important to strengthen school identity and attract new students, especially in a competitive market.

Keywords: branding · education · competition · Indonesia · Muslim schools

1 Introduction

Islamic educational institutions, such as Islamic Boarding Schools and Madrasahs, have significantly contributed to educating Indonesian society, especially in preparing superior, skilled, creative, professional human resources with a solid religious foundation. There was a bad stereotype of Islamic educational institutions as dirty and old-fashioned. Still, elite Islamic schools have emerged with modern academic concepts that align with Islamic identity. The school is called modern because it teaches science and technology, and Islamic because it bases knowledge on verses from the Koran [1]. The development of this Muslim elite school, occurred after the reform in 1998. Before the reform, the national education system was more dichotomous and centralized. The private sector has yet to play much of a role in managing educational institutions. The quality of national education, especially in morality, has many problems. Responding to the conditions, many Muslim leaders took the initiative to establish private Islamic schools of various kinds. Even though they are diverse, these schools have one goal: to create Muslim personalities with a comprehensive education system with a balanced moral, mental and physical education by integrating science and religion in a balanced way [2]. The presence of elite Muslim schools adds to the features of Islamic education in Indonesia. This

school was originally initiated by the activists of the Salman ITB and UI mosques with the name “Sekolah Islam Terpadu Nurul Fikri” in Jakarta, which establishes in 1993, the style of this institution wanted to combine Islamic boarding schools or Pondok Pesantren with a curriculum to learn about Islam solely with schools belonging to a government that places a lot of emphasis on the science curriculum, resulting in integration and no dichotomy in national education [3].

In the 20th century, elite Muslim schools in Indonesia attracted attention and grew rapidly, especially in urban areas. Among the factors are: 1. There is an increasing awareness of the religion of the upper-class Muslim community, 2. The response of dissatisfaction of the upper-class Muslim community towards national education, which emphasizes more on cognitive aspects, has not provided a balanced portion of instilling *akhlaq al-karimah*, 3. Public schools have been unable to follow the science and technology-based progress of the times, 4. There are doubts in some Muslim societies about graduates of Islamic boarding schools and madrasas, which cannot compete in the global world, 5. The emergence of the concept of Islamization of education and the view of the integration of science and religion initiated by Muslim intellectuals, 6. Muslims want to realize education that balances intellectual, emotional, and spiritual and increases awareness of upper-class Muslims for quality education [4, 5]. To realize this, the principal of the elite Muslim school devised a branding strategy to build the school’s image of being superior and competitive. In the 21st century, there is a trend toward the existence of elite Muslim schools in Indonesia. Muslim elite schools are now increasingly in demand by the upper-middle-class economic class because they have various advantages in education, including management, curriculum, teaching, academic staff, infrastructure, student affairs, financing, and cooperation, as in the Table 1.

Good branding strategy management will eventually bring up the popularity and trust of the middle-class society to enter elite Muslim schools. The branding strategy was originally implemented in the business world but has now been adopted by the world of education, especially in marketing and strengthening the image of institutions or branding for private schools. While strategic management means managerial decisions in determining the success of a business which consists of strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation [6, 7]. Because the strategy is long-term planning to organize all activities to achieve excellence in the field of business and services in particular [8]. One of the factors in the success of elite Muslim schools in gaining public trust is the development of a good branding strategy management team. Larisa’s research on the Marketing Strategy of Quality Management During the reorganization of Regional Universities to Industry 4.0 states that university marketing strategy management is carried out by: (1) professional organizational arrangements, (2) placement of appropriate digital personnel, (3) formulating the right brand, and (4) innovative marketing [9]. Arif’s research on Marketing Strategy Through Rebranding at SD Muhammadiyah 24 Surabaya, the results stated that the strategies undertaken to build the image of private schools included: (1) excellent school services, (2) fostering students to excel, (3) intensely fostering teacher professionalism (4) complete infrastructure, (5) form school marketing, (7) utilize social media with various school premium content, (8) receive criticism and input from parents [10, 11]. The management stages of educational institution branding strategies are illustrated in the Table 2.

Table 1. Several Aspects of Excellence in Muslim Elite Schools

Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school applies the concept of TQM (Total Quality Management) management, and the principal is the top leader who has good managerial skills. • Management is more anticipatory, adaptive to changes and transparent governance, and prioritizes customer satisfaction. • Creating a dynamic and visionary school organizational culture and leadership that can move all stakeholders.
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The curriculum integrates the public school with the Pesantren and international curricula. • Implementing the curriculum is emphasized in instilling Islamic values with practicum, indoor and outdoor activities with contextual learning, and project-based learning approaches. • The curriculum is updated according to global demands and needs.
Studentship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are strictly selected with specific requirements, and registration is booked in advance. • Students are required to live in dormitories with a round-the-clock learning system accompanied by a teacher and excellent service from the teacher. • Students' talents, interests, and abilities can be actualized because there are various kinds of extracurriculars guided by competent and responsible teachers.
Educators and staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators and staff must have good scientific competence and provide service and attention to students. • Educators must have pedagogical competence, a pious personality, social and professional, and the ability to read and write the Koran. • Educators are always updated with knowledge and experience with IT-based learning technology and foreign language skills, namely English or Arabic.
Facilities and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The institution has a magnificent building, air-conditioned classrooms, complete infrastructure and laboratory facilities, and 24-h health care. • Each class has an ideal number of students, namely 25–30 students per class. • The institution has adequate sports fields, complete extracurricular facilities, and guest houses for visiting parents.
Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cost of education is relatively high. The cost of developing early-year education ranges from 30–40 million, which is paid at the beginning of the year. • Monthly education development contributions are around 2–3 million. • Activities bill in one year are around 5–6 million per year.

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Table 1. (continued)

School environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school environment has a beautiful and spacious garden arrangement. • The school environment is very safe because there is 24-h security and complete CCTV monitors. • Guests and guardians of students who visit are well served because there are special public service officers.
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Table 2. Stages of School Branding Strategy

First	Formulate the vision, mission, and goals of the school.
Second	Determine the output of education.
Third	Define market segments.
Fourth	Form a “marketing team.”
Fifth	Internal, external and interactive marketing.
Sixth	Learn from Competitors.
Seventh	Utilize technology in conducting promotions.
Eighth	Involve business and industry.

2 Methodology

This research is qualitative field research with a multi-case approach with a naturalistic paradigm that will describe and analyze phenomena, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts individually and in groups. The research locations are three elite Muslim schools in East Java: Ar-Risalah Kediri High School, Excellent Amanatul Ummah Mojokerto Madrasah Aliyah, and Ar-Rahmah Islamic Boarding School High School in Malang. The three schools above are included in the category of elite Muslim schools in East Java. The informants included foundations, school principals, vice public relations representatives, and student guardians. Observation, questionnaires, and interviews carried out data collection. Data analysis was carried out in three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions.

3 Results and Discussion

In this paper, there are two objects to be analyzed, namely strategic management and school branding. Regarding strategy management, it was found that the three schools had carried out three marketing management stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation [12]: *First*, the school principal prepared careful planning by forming a team chaired by the Deputy Principal for Public Relations and publications. *Second*, the implementation by team by compiling a schedule with the branding strategy used. *Third*, an evaluation of the results achieved is carried out by measuring the increase in the acquisition of new students. This is explained in the Table 3.

Table 3. Implementation of Branding Strategy Management

Strategy Formulation	Strategy Implemented	Strategy Evaluation
Vision and Mission Development	Determine the right strategy policy	The principal analyzes when and why the strategy is not working
Long term goal setting	Establish an effective organizational structure	Review internal inhibiting factors
Identify external opportunities	Strategy development	Examination of external factors and competitors
Identify internal strengths	Designing a budget	Measuring the effectiveness of team performance
Internal weakness analysis	Information system utilization	Determination of corrective steps
Formulate alternative strategies	Linking team compensation to organizational performance	Determination of the right solution

Table 4. Branding Strategy for Elite Muslim Schools in East Java

Amanatul Ummah High School Mojokerto	Ar-Risalah High School Kediri	Ar-Rahmah High School Malang
Leaders of the Foundation (Kyai) as public figures on an international scale are the primary key to branding.	The leader of the Foundation is Kyai's son as, the leading branding public figure.	The central foundation uniformly designs the school branding
Innovations made by the leadership by making excellent classes	Students, each period, carry out outdoor learning in China as the primary branding.	No branding team was formed, but school promotions were carried out together with stakeholders
The quality of graduates with various skills as marketing pillars, especially national-level academic achievements	Student achievements in the academic field are always updated on the school website and other mass media.	Branding is more emphasized on aspects of understanding and religious behavior with a solid Islamic boarding school spirit
Developing national and international level cooperation networks through the Kyai figure	There is a strong synergy with student guardians by holding meetings every semester	Attitudes and behavior of students at Islamic boarding schools and homes become role models and a brand of trust for student parents

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Table 4. (continued)

Amanatul Ummah High School Mojokerto	Ar-Risalah High School Kediri	Ar-Rahmah High School Malang
Graduates who are widely accepted on foreign campuses are the school's primary branding	Guardians of students introduce the various advantages of the school as the central marketing.	Student guardians as the primary branding media by holding offline and online meetings every quarter with various forms of programs
There is a reward given to the principal for his achievements	Branding is not at a high cost because it does not use the services of content creators owned by schools.	No marketing and branding with content creator services
Building Multi Level Marketing through student and alumni guardians	Branding emphasizes the excellence of schools and collaboration with institutions and agencies by participating in various events.	No particular team was formed to carry out promotions and branding, however, but maximizing existing teachers and staff

The second is about school branding. Stephanie M. Mangus stated that branding is the process of creating a distinct identity for a business in the mind of consumers so that users recognize a product and are interested in using it [13]. Thus a brand is an identity created by someone so that consumers can easily choose a product or service [14]. In this research, the branding strategies of the three schools differ in several factors, including: the vision, mission, and goals of the school, the figure of the chairman of the foundation or Kyai, the creativity of the principal as a leader, a comfortable school environment, the leadership's ability to build national and international cooperation, the school's budget, the advantages that owned by the school, the team's ability to choose a strategy, and other aspects. The results of the branding strategy for each school are explained in the Table 4.

4 Conclusion

In East Java, Indonesia, there are elite Muslim schools that have certain advantages compared to regular schools, and branding is an important aspect for them. The success of these schools in building a superior brand image is due to their branding strategy management with stages of strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Each school has a different branding strategy depending on the policy of the foundation's chairman and the principal. These strategies include collaboration with student guardians, building cooperation with other agencies and institutions, involving students in competitions, having a charismatic foundation head, forming a marketing team, and utilizing websites and social media for branding. The implication is that branding is crucial for elite Muslim schools to attract students and build a positive image, and these strategies could be used as examples for other schools to follow.

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