

School Branding as a Driver of Institutional Competitiveness: Insights from a Qualitative Case Study in Indonesia

Galih Permadi^{*1}, Moh. Khusnuridlo², Ainur Rafik³, Achmad Mahrus Helmi⁴

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia

⁴Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Raden Abdullah Yaqin Jember

*Email Corresponding author: permadigalih1984@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the implementation of school branding strategies in developing institutional image and enhancing the attractiveness of prospective students at MAN Lumajang. The research addresses the increasing competition among educational institutions, which requires schools to establish strong identities and gain public trust. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis involving key stakeholders, including the principal, vice principals, students, and parents. The findings reveal that MAN Lumajang implements a holistic and integrated branding strategy that combines academic excellence, skill-based programs, and Islamic character development. Branding is not only carried out through external promotion but also through strengthening internal quality and institutional culture. The use of multi-channel communication, including social media and collaboration with stakeholders, plays a significant role in disseminating the institution's achievements and values. The results indicate that this strategy has successfully transformed public perception, strengthened institutional credibility, and increased student enrollment. The study highlights that effective school branding requires alignment between institutional values, practices, and communication strategies. These findings provide practical insights for educational institutions in developing sustainable branding strategies to enhance competitiveness and public trust.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing competition among educational institutions has created significant pressure for schools to establish strong institutional identities and gain public trust. In recent years, parents have become more selective in choosing schools, prioritizing not only academic excellence but also character development and future readiness (Berman, 2024; Borger et al., 2024; Pusztai et al., 2023). This phenomenon is evident in the unequal distribution of student enrollment, where some schools experience a surplus of applicants while others struggle to attract students. In Indonesia,

this condition reflects the growing importance of institutional reputation and differentiation in the education sector (Aladwan & Alshami, 2022; Setiana et al., 2025; Andini, et al., 2024). Educational institutions that fail to build a recognizable identity often face declining enrollment or even institutional merger (Bowman et al., 2023; Darriet & Santibañez, 2024; Diemer et al., 2023). At the same time, the rising interest in religious-based education indicates a shift in societal expectations, where parents seek a balance between academic competence and moral values (Falera, 2023; Hyde, 2024). In this context, school branding emerges as a strategic approach to enhance institutional visibility, credibility, and attractiveness among prospective students.

Existing studies have examined school branding from various perspectives, including institutional strategy, leadership roles, and communication approaches (Bush, 2021, 2025; Ogunbayo & Yassim, 2025). Research has shown that branding plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and strengthening institutional competitiveness, particularly through the promotion of program excellence and stakeholder engagement (Braga & Cacharo, 2025; Khachatryan, 2023). Several studies highlight the importance of leadership and public relations in managing branding strategies, while others emphasize the role of community-based approaches and institutional image development (Ahmad & Mustofa, 2025; Robson, 2021). However, prior research tends to focus on specific aspects of branding, such as promotional strategies or leadership roles, without fully addressing the integration between internal quality development and external communication. In addition, studies on branding in Islamic educational institutions often emphasize religious identity but lack comprehensive analysis of how academic, technological, and religious dimensions can be integrated into a cohesive branding strategy (Ahmad & Mustofa, 2025).

This study addresses these gaps by examining school branding as a holistic and integrative strategy that combines institutional identity, educational practices, and stakeholder involvement. Unlike previous studies that focus on isolated elements of branding, this research explores how branding is implemented simultaneously as an internal quality framework and an external communication strategy. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on MAN Lumajang as a case where branding is not only used to promote institutional image but also to construct a distinctive value proposition that integrates academic excellence, skill development, and Islamic character education. Furthermore, this study considers the role of digitalization and multi-channel communication in strengthening institutional branding, which remains underexplored in existing literature.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the school branding strategy implemented at MAN Lumajang in developing institutional image and enhancing the attractiveness of prospective students. Specifically, this study aims to identify the forms of branding strategies employed, examine how these strategies contribute to image construction, and analyze their impact on student enrollment and public trust. By focusing on both qualitative and quantitative indicators, such as stakeholder perceptions and student enrollment trends, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of branding practices in educational institutions.

This study focuses on exploring how branding strategies are constructed, implemented, and experienced within the institutional context. It examines the role of stakeholders, communication channels, and program innovation in shaping institutional identity and public perception. Through a qualitative approach, the study seeks to

provide an in-depth understanding of how branding operates as a dynamic process that connects institutional values, practices, and stakeholder experiences. This exploration is expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of school branding as a strategic tool in educational management and to provide insights for institutions seeking to strengthen their competitiveness in an increasingly complex educational landscape.

RESEARCHS METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore in depth the implementation of school branding strategies at MAN Lumajang. A qualitative approach is selected because it enables the researcher to understand meanings, perceptions, and experiences of participants in a natural context, particularly in examining how branding strategies are constructed, implemented, and experienced by various stakeholders (Hughes et al., 2025; Kremer et al., 2025; White Eyes, 2023). The case study design is considered appropriate as the research focuses on a single institution, allowing for an in-depth and contextual analysis of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting (Hidayah & Pulungan, 2024; Xiong, 2021). MAN Lumajang is chosen as the research site due to its unique position as the only public Islamic senior high school in the district and its ability to integrate academic, religious, and skill-based programs. This design allows the researcher to capture the complexity of branding practices and their relationship with institutional image and student attraction within a specific educational context.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to explore participants' perspectives regarding branding strategies, including their formulation, implementation, and perceived impact. Participatory observation was carried out by directly engaging in school activities, such as student admissions, religious programs, competitions, and daily routines, to capture authentic practices related to institutional branding. Document analysis complemented these methods by examining official records, including school profiles, promotional materials, meeting notes, and documentation of branding activities. The research involved purposively selected informants who possess relevant knowledge and experience, including the principal, vice principals (public relations, curriculum, and student affairs), students, and parents. The study was conducted at MAN Lumajang, and data credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement, continuous observation, triangulation of sources, peer debriefing, and member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretations (Lloyd et al., 2024; Motulsky, 2021; Piedra, 2024).

Table 1. Research Informants

Informant	Role/Function
Principal	Responsible for institutional policy and strategic decisions
Vice Principal (Public Relations)	Manages external communication and branding activities
Vice Principal (Curriculum)	Oversees academic programs and curriculum implementation
Vice Principal (Student Affairs)	Responsible for student activities and development
Students	Provide perspectives on learning experience and branding impact
Parents	Provide perspectives on trust, perception, and school attractiveness

Data analysis in this study follows the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing

(Asipi et al., 2022). In the data condensation phase, the researcher systematically selects, focuses, and organizes relevant data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents, while excluding information that does not align with the research focus (Frericks, 2022). The data are then categorized into themes such as institutional identity, communication strategies, stakeholder roles, and public perception. In the data display stage, findings are presented in the form of descriptive narratives, matrices, and tables to facilitate pattern recognition and interpretation. This structured presentation allows the researcher to identify relationships between branding strategies and their impact on institutional image and student attraction. Finally, conclusions are drawn through an iterative process, where initial interpretations are continuously verified by comparing data from multiple sources. This process ensures that the findings reflect consistent patterns and meaningful insights derived from the data. The analytical procedure emphasizes depth, coherence, and contextual understanding to produce credible and well-grounded conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Perception and Interpretation of School Branding Strategy

Perception and interpretation of branding strategy refer to stakeholders' perspectives and understanding of school branding as both an institutional identity and a strategic approach. In the context of MAN Lumajang, branding is understood as a strategic effort to build a positive institutional image, enhance attractiveness, and strengthen competitiveness amid competition with public schools and other madrasahs. Branding is not merely perceived as promotional activity, but as a representation of values, character, and institutional excellence that reflects the integration of academic achievement, skills development, and Islamic values. Furthermore, branding is positioned as an internal guideline to maintain the quality of educational services. Thus, the interpretation of branding at MAN Lumajang reflects an institutional awareness that identity must be consistently constructed through flagship programs, publication strategies, and the involvement of all madrasah members in order to shape positive and sustainable public perceptions.

The understanding of the importance of school branding at MAN Lumajang emerges from the awareness of the madrasah leadership regarding the need to strengthen the institution's image amid educational competition. Branding is viewed as an essential strategy to attract public interest while maintaining the quality of educational services. This is emphasized through leadership statements that position branding as a central element in institutional management. As stated by the Principal of MAN Lumajang: "School branding is very important for an educational institution, including MAN Lumajang. School branding becomes an attraction for the community to enroll their children in MAN Lumajang. It also serves as a guideline for MAN Lumajang to maintain the quality of its flagship educational services." This is in line with the statement of the Vice Principal for Public Relations: "The role of public relations is not only to engage with parents or other stakeholders, but also to actively publish and promote the madrasah's flagship programs so that the public becomes aware of its strengths."

Based on the interview results above, school branding is understood as a strategy that plays a significant role in building the institutional image. The principal emphasizes

that branding functions both as an attraction and as a guideline in maintaining the quality of educational services. This indicates that branding is not only externally oriented but also has an internal function in directing service quality. Meanwhile, the statement from the vice principal for public relations shows that branding is implemented through the publication of flagship programs so that they become widely known to the public. This highlights that public communication is an essential component of the branding strategy. Thus, from the interviews conducted with the informants, it can be understood that branding at MAN Lumajang is not merely a promotional tool, but an integrated strategy that connects publication activities, service quality, and public perception of the institution.

Based on the above findings, the forms of branding strategy are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Branding Strategies and Their Outcomes at MAN Lumajang

Branding Strategy	Outcomes/Benefits
Publication of flagship programs through public relations	The public becomes aware of the madrasah's strengths
Strengthening Islamic value identity	Establishment of a religious and character-based image
Student involvement in creative media	Branding becomes more authentic
Integration of academic and skill-based programs	Increased institutional attractiveness

The quantitative data further support the findings related to school branding at MAN Lumajang. The increase in the number of students over the years reflects the effectiveness of branding in attracting public interest. This trend is illustrated in Figure 1.

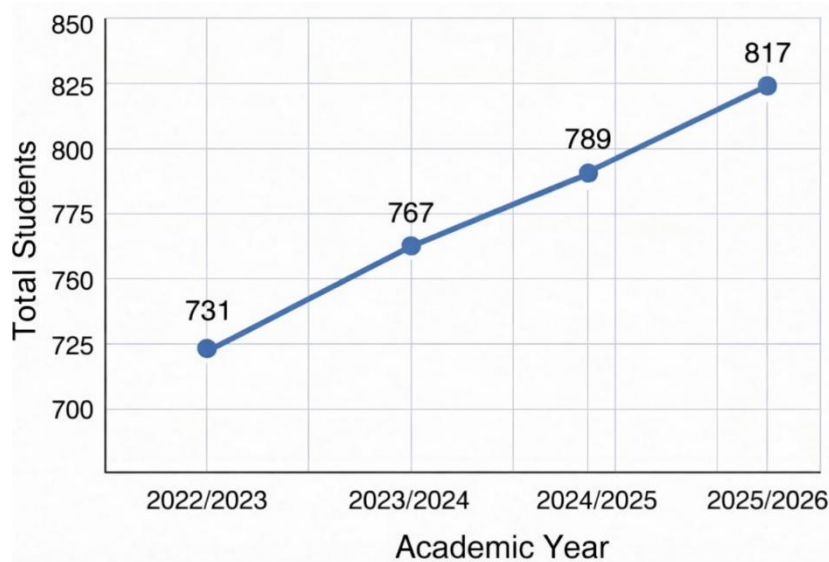


Figure 1. Growth in Total Student Enrollment at MAN Lumajang (2022–2025)

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the perception and interpretation of school branding at MAN Lumajang reflect a strong awareness among the leadership and all madrasah members regarding the importance of branding as a primary strategy in building the institutional image. Branding is not only understood as a promotional tool but as a representation of the madrasah's identity, reflecting the integration of academic excellence, skills, and Islamic values. In addition, branding functions as a

guideline for maintaining the quality of educational services, indicating a close relationship between the constructed image and actual practices in the field. The involvement of various stakeholders, including public relations and students, further strengthens the comprehensive implementation of branding. Thus, the interpretation of branding at MAN Lumajang shows that this strategy is implemented in an integrated and sustainable manner to build public trust and enhance the attractiveness of the educational institution.

Implementation of School Branding Strategy

The implementation of school branding strategy refers to the practical execution of branding concepts through structured programs, communication strategies, and institutional activities. In the context of MAN Lumajang, branding implementation is not limited to promotional efforts but is integrated into various aspects of institutional operations, including academic programs, student affairs, public relations, and service systems. This implementation aims to build a positive institutional image, strengthen public trust, and enhance the attractiveness of the madrasah among prospective students. The strategy is carried out through a collaborative approach involving all stakeholders, including leadership, teachers, students, and external partners. Furthermore, branding is realized through consistent communication, program innovation, and the embodiment of Islamic values in daily practices. Thus, the implementation of branding at MAN Lumajang reflects a systematic and integrated effort to align institutional identity with actual practices in order to maintain competitiveness and relevance in the educational landscape.

As stated by the Vice Principal for Public Relations: “We build communication with them, because we respect them. What I do is to overcome obstacles by establishing communication with NGOs and journalists so that we can jointly think about the future of the nation’s children.” This is reinforced by the statement of the Principal: “School branding also serves as a guideline for MAN Lumajang to maintain the quality of its flagship educational services.” This is also supported by the statement of the Vice Principal for Curriculum: “We always respond positively and quickly to any changes in curriculum policies, whether from the Ministry of National Education or the Ministry of Religious Affairs.”

Field findings show that the implementation of branding at MAN Lumajang is carried out through various concrete practices. The madrasah applies a multi-channel communication strategy by utilizing social media, websites, and printed media to disseminate information about programs and achievements. In addition, collaboration with local media and external institutions is also conducted to expand the reach of branding. Branding is also implemented through flagship programs such as Tahfiz Al-Qur’an, academic competitions, skill-based programs, and character education. Student involvement is evident through participation in organizations, creative media production such as Manja TV, and various extracurricular activities. Furthermore, service quality is strengthened through the use of technology, transparent communication with parents, and institutional support for student development. These findings indicate that branding is implemented not only through communication but also through programs, services, and active stakeholder involvement.

Based on the above findings, the forms of branding strategy implementation are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Implementation of Branding Strategies and Their Outcomes at MAN Lumajang

Strategy	Forms of Implementation	Outcomes/Benefits
External communication strategy	Collaboration with media, LSM, and stakeholders	Strengthening public trust and institutional relationships
Quality assurance through branding	Branding used as a guideline for maintaining service quality	Consistency in educational service excellence
Curriculum adaptability	Responding quickly to policy changes from ministries	Maintaining institutional relevance and competitiveness
Multi-channel publication	Use of social media, website, and printed media	Expanding visibility and public engagement
Flagship program development	Tahfiz, academic competitions, skill programs	Increasing institutional attractiveness
Student involvement in branding	Organizations, Manja TV, creative media production	Building participatory and authentic branding
Service and technology integration	Digital communication and student support systems	Improving service efficiency and satisfaction
External collaboration (DUDI, institutions)	Internship and partnership programs	Enhancing real-world relevance of education

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of school branding at MAN Lumajang is carried out in a structured, integrated, and collaborative manner. Branding is not only implemented through promotional activities but also through communication strategies, program development, service quality improvement, and institutional adaptability. The involvement of various stakeholders, including leadership, teachers, students, and external partners, strengthens the effectiveness of branding implementation. In addition, the integration of branding into academic programs, student activities, and service systems ensures that the institutional image is aligned with actual practices. Thus, branding implementation at MAN Lumajang reflects a comprehensive strategy that connects communication, quality, and innovation, enabling the madrasah to maintain competitiveness and strengthen its position as an attractive educational institution.

The Impact of School Branding Strategy on Institutional Image and Student Attraction

The impact of school branding strategy refers to the outcomes resulting from the implementation of branding in shaping institutional image and influencing prospective students' interest. In the context of MAN Lumajang, branding impacts are reflected in changes in public perception, increased trust from parents, and growing interest among prospective students. The branding strategy contributes to positioning the madrasah as a competitive educational institution that integrates academic excellence, skill development, and Islamic values. These impacts are also evident in the strengthening of institutional reputation through student achievements, improved public recognition, and the increasing number of student enrollments. Furthermore, branding influences not only external perceptions but also internal dynamics, including student motivation and institutional pride. Thus, the impact of branding at MAN Lumajang represents the alignment between institutional identity, public perception, and stakeholder trust in the educational services provided.

The implementation of branding at MAN Lumajang has led to significant changes in public perception. The madrasah is increasingly recognized as a leading institution with strong academic and non-academic achievements. This perception is reinforced by

testimonies from parents and students who directly experience the impact of the branding strategy. As stated by one parent: “I chose MAN Lumajang because of its reputation as a leading madrasah that excels both academically, especially in science, and non-academically such as in MTQ and OSN.” Another parent stated: “Before enrolling, I thought it was a rigid traditional madrasah. After my child studied here, I see it as a modern madrasah that adapts to the times. I observed the use of technology in learning, varied teaching methods, and a well-structured student leadership system. Its image has completely changed into a progressive madrasah.”

Based on the interviews above, it can be understood that the branding strategy implemented by MAN Lumajang has a direct impact on shaping public perception. The statements from parents indicate that the madrasah’s image has shifted significantly from being perceived as traditional to being recognized as modern and adaptive. This transformation shows that branding is effective in redefining institutional identity in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, the emphasis on both academic and non-academic achievements highlights that branding successfully communicates the madrasah’s strengths. The consistency of this message strengthens trust and influences decision-making among prospective students and parents. Thus, through the interviews conducted, it is evident that branding not only enhances visibility but also builds credibility and trust, which are essential factors in attracting prospective students.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the school branding strategy at MAN Lumajang has a significant impact on both institutional image and student attraction. Branding has successfully transformed public perception, strengthened trust, and enhanced the madrasah’s reputation as a competitive educational institution. The integration of academic excellence, skill-based programs, and Islamic values creates a distinctive identity that differentiates the madrasah from other institutions. In addition, the increasing number of student enrollments and positive testimonials from parents indicate that branding effectively influences decision-making among prospective students. Thus, the impact of branding at MAN Lumajang reflects a strong alignment between institutional identity, public perception, and stakeholder trust, contributing to the sustainability and competitiveness of the madrasah.

Discussion

This study reveals that the school branding strategy implemented at MAN Lumajang is constructed through a multidimensional, integrated, and collaborative approach involving all stakeholders, including leadership, teachers, students, parents, and alumni. The findings indicate that branding is not merely positioned as a promotional activity but as a strategic instrument that aligns institutional identity, educational practices, and public perception. The distinctive feature of the branding strategy lies in its ability to offer a “comprehensive educational package,” combining academic and technological excellence with strong Islamic character development. The branding process is supported by consistent storytelling centered on student achievements, religious practices, and alumni success, which are disseminated through integrated multi-channel communication. As a result, the institutional image has shifted from being perceived as a traditional madrasah to a modern, progressive, and religious educational institution. This transformation is further reflected in the increase in student enrollment by 11.8% over four years, indicating strengthened public trust and growing attractiveness among prospective students (Hope, 2022; Kelchen, 2025; Posmik, 2022).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that branding at MAN Lumajang functions as both a communication strategy and a structural mechanism for sustaining institutional quality and competitiveness.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on school branding by demonstrating that effective branding in educational institutions requires the integration of identity, practice, and stakeholder engagement. Similar to previous studies, which highlight the importance of data-driven communication and stakeholder involvement in shaping institutional image (Qi et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2023), this study confirms that consistent communication of achievements and program excellence plays a crucial role in influencing public perception. However, this study extends prior research by emphasizing the role of integrated Islamic values as a core component of branding strategy in Islamic educational institutions. Unlike conventional school branding models that focus primarily on academic performance and marketing communication, the findings reveal that the incorporation of religious practices and character-building programs creates a distinctive positioning that strengthens both emotional and rational appeal (Churampi, 2025; Limpinska, 2025; , et al., 2024). Furthermore, this study addresses a gap in the literature by showing how branding operates not only as an external communication tool but also as an internal guideline that shapes institutional behavior and service quality. This dual function of branding highlights its role as a comprehensive institutional strategy rather than a fragmented marketing effort.

This study contributes to the field of educational management by providing an empirical model of integrated school branding that combines academic excellence, technological competence, and character development within a unified institutional strategy. The findings highlight the importance of aligning branding strategies with institutional culture and daily practices, demonstrating that branding should not be treated as a separate promotional function but embedded within core organizational processes. The active involvement of stakeholders, particularly students and alumni as brand ambassadors, illustrates how institutional identity can be co-constructed and strengthened through participatory practices. Furthermore, the study offers practical insights into how educational institutions can develop a distinctive and competitive positioning by integrating multiple value dimensions into a coherent value proposition. This contributes to a more holistic understanding of educational management, where leadership, curriculum implementation, service quality, and stakeholder engagement are interconnected in shaping institutional image and sustainability.

This study underscores the significance of school branding as a strategic and integrative approach in developing institutional image and attracting prospective students. The findings demonstrate that successful branding is not solely dependent on promotional activities but requires consistency between institutional values, educational practices, and communication strategies. The case of MAN Lumajang illustrates that a well-executed branding strategy can transform public perception, strengthen trust, and enhance institutional competitiveness. The integration of academic excellence, technological skills, and Islamic values creates a unique institutional identity that resonates with diverse stakeholder expectations. This positioning enables the madrasah to attract a broad range of prospective students while maintaining its core identity. For future research, it is recommended to explore comparative studies across different Islamic educational institutions to examine

variations in branding strategies and their impact on institutional performance. Additionally, further studies could investigate the long-term sustainability of branding strategies in adapting to changing educational demands and technological advancements.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses how school branding strategies can be effectively utilized to develop institutional image and enhance the attractiveness of prospective students in the context of increasing competition among educational institutions. The findings demonstrate that MAN Lumajang has implemented a holistic and integrated branding strategy that involves all stakeholders, including leadership, teachers, students, alumni, and parents, while simultaneously strengthening internal quality through academic, skill-based, and religious programs. The study also reveals that the madrasah has successfully constructed a distinctive institutional image by integrating academic-technological excellence with authentic character development, transforming public perception from a traditional institution into a modern, progressive, and religious one.

Furthermore, the strategic use of multi-channel communication supported by consistent evidence—such as student achievements and alumni success—has strengthened the credibility of the institutional narrative. This integrated approach has contributed directly to increased student enrollment, broader market reach, and stronger stakeholder loyalty. These findings imply that sustainable school branding requires alignment between institutional values, practices, and communication strategies, as well as long-term consistency in organizational culture. Therefore, educational institutions are encouraged to adopt integrative and evidence-based branding approaches to remain competitive, while future research may explore comparative models of branding implementation across different educational contexts.

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