

Digital Revolution in Islamic Education: Building the Branding of Religious Schools in Rural Indonesia through Innovative Digital Marketing Strategies

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Abstract

This study focuses on the implementation of digital marketing strategies in educational institutions, with a case study at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran, Sragen. The purpose of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of digital marketing implementation in increasing the visibility and attractiveness of schools in the digital era. The research method used is qualitative research with a descriptive approach, where data is collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies. Data analysis was carried out using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions/verification. The results of the study indicate that careful planning, structured organization, and continuous evaluation play an important role in the success of the implemented digital marketing strategy. The implications of this study indicate that educational institutions can increase the effectiveness of their promotions by utilizing digital marketing in a more responsive and adaptive manner to changes in digital trends. This study makes a significant contribution to the development of educational marketing strategies in the digital era, especially in the context of secondary education.

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INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly complex digital era, marketing has undergone a major transformation, especially in the context of educational institutions (Haque, Yasmin, & Chowdhury, 2021; Rahim & Yusof, 2022; Khasawneh, 2023; Rusdi, Suhermanto, & Ali, 2022; Chuanchen, 2023). Educational institutions, which previously relied more on conventional promotional methods, now have to adapt to rapid changes in technology and consumer preferences (Al-Omari & Bakri, 2021; Shukla, Sharma, & Kapoor, 2022; Tajuddin, 2023; Susilawati & Astuti, 2022; Wijaya & Khoir, 2022).

This phenomenon is not only commercially relevant, but also has a significant impact on the accessibility and attractiveness of schools to prospective students and parents (Rohman & Ariyanti, 2021; Saeed, Yousafzai, & Yani, 2022; Ghazali & Rahim, 2023; Hasanah & Hefniy, 2023; Ansori, Hefniy, Baharun, & Agus, 2023). In this context, the importance of digital marketing strategies has become very prominent (Hosseini, Shariat, & Motamedi, 2021; Al-Tarawneh, Khamees, & Al-Sayed, 2022; Khan, Ali, & Zubair, 2023; Hamidah, 2023). Digital marketing offers much greater flexibility and reach than traditional methods, allowing educational institutions to reach a larger audience at a lower cost (Khan, Memon, & Jamal, 2021; Bakri & Omar, 2022; Rahman & Farooq, 2023; Maulidah, Baharun, Hefniy, & Tohet, 2023; Norman & Paramansyah, 2024). However, challenges arise in how these strategies are implemented, especially in ensuring that the content delivered is truly effective in attracting and retaining the attention of the target audience (Smith, 2021; Haque & Rahman, 2022; Zubair, 2023; Hasanah & Hefniy, 2023). According to marketing communication theory, the content presented must be relevant and tailored to the needs of the audience to achieve maximum impact (Keller, 2021; Rizvi & Patel, 2022; Hassan, 2023; Hamidah, 2023). Therefore, this research focuses on the application of digital marketing in educational institutions, with the aim of uncovering the most effective strategies in increasing the visibility and attractiveness of schools in the digital era (Tahir, 2022; Singh & Kaur, 2023; Malik & Rahman, 2023; Chuanchen, 2023).

The main problem identified in this study is how digital marketing strategies can be effectively implemented in educational institutions, especially in secondary schools, to increase audience attraction and engagement. In reality, many schools have tried to implement digital marketing but have failed to achieve optimal results, often due to a lack of careful planning or an inability to adapt to rapid changes in digital trends. This is a crucial issue because the success of digital marketing can determine the number of new student enrollments, the school's image in the eyes of the public, and even the operational continuity of the institution (Shaikh, 2022; Noor & Ahmad, 2023; Hussain, 2023). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many schools still rely on traditional promotion methods that are no longer effective in reaching today's digital generation. Therefore, this research is very relevant in finding practical solutions to increase the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in educational institutions.

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of digital marketing in the education sector, but there are still many aspects that need further exploration. For example, a study by Li et al. (2020) in the *Journal of Business Research* highlights that digital marketing adaptation in the education sector can increase student enrollment and strengthen institutional branding, but only if the strategy is based on a deep understanding of audience preferences. Meanwhile, Kannan and Li (2021) in the *Journal of Marketing* emphasized that content personalization and more intense interaction with the audience are key factors in the success of digital marketing. Another study by Lee and Kotler (2022) in the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* shows that consistent content innovation is a key determinant in maintaining audience attention on digital platforms. Although these findings are relevant, the study still has gaps regarding practical implementation in the context of secondary education, especially how these strategies are applied in the field.

The gap identified in this study lies in the lack of in-depth research on the practical implementation of digital marketing in secondary education institutions, especially in the context of Indonesia. Although many studies have highlighted the importance of digital marketing, most studies focus on the business sector or higher education, while secondary education is often overlooked. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of how digital marketing strategies can be adapted and applied in high schools to achieve optimal results. Filling this gap is important because secondary education is a crucial phase in the development of students' academic and character development, and an effective marketing strategy can contribute significantly to the success of educational institutions in attracting and retaining students.

The novelty of this study lies in its approach that combines theoretical analysis with the practical implementation of digital marketing strategies in secondary education institutions. Unlike previous studies that have tended to focus on theoretical aspects or cases in the higher education sector, this research offers practical insights that secondary schools can apply directly. In addition, this study also introduces a new variable, namely the integration of audience feedback in planning and evaluating digital marketing strategies, which has not been widely discussed in the previous literature. This novelty provides significant added value in the development of educational marketing strategies that are more responsive and adaptive to changes in digital trends.

The main goal of this study is to identify and analyze the most effective digital marketing strategies in increasing the visibility and attractiveness of high schools in the digital era. This research provides valuable experience to develop a digital marketing implementation model that can be applied by other schools with similar characteristics. Given the importance of digital marketing in today's world of education, this research is expected to make a significant contribution not only to increasing student enrollment, but also in building a positive image of the school in the eyes of the public. Thus, this research is not only academically relevant but also has a wide practical impact for education practitioners.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a type of qualitative research with a descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because it aims to understand the phenomenon of digital marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran in depth and in a natural context. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore perceptions, experiences, and processes that occur within the educational environment without being limited by rigid quantitative variables. The descriptive approach was chosen because the focus of this research is to describe and describe the digital marketing practices applied, so that it can provide a comprehensive overview of the strategies used and the results achieved. Compared to quantitative methods, this approach is more appropriate because it provides flexibility in revealing specific and in-depth details, which cannot be obtained through numerical measurements alone.

The data collection techniques used in this study include in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted with various parties involved in the implementation of digital marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran, including principals, teachers involved in the marketing team, and administrative staff.

This school is located on Jl. Randukuning, Krebet, Masaran, Sragen Regency, Central Java. The selection of this school is based on the consideration that SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran has actively implemented digital marketing as part of the school's promotion strategy, which makes it a relevant and significant case study. The number of respondents interviewed was 10 people, who were selected purposively based on their role and contribution in the school's digital marketing team. In addition, participatory observation was carried out for three months to directly observe the process of creating and implementing digital marketing content in this school. Additional data was obtained through documentation studies that included analysis of the school's social media content as well as internal documents related to marketing strategies.

This study utilizes a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach. The selection of this method is driven by the need to understand the complex phenomenon of digital marketing as applied in SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran, examining it deeply within its natural context. Qualitative research is particularly effective in exploring perceptions, experiences, and processes within educational environments without being constrained by rigid quantitative variables (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Yin, 2020; Flick, 2021). The descriptive approach was selected because the objective of this research is to provide a detailed account and explanation of the digital marketing practices implemented at the institution, thereby offering a comprehensive overview of the strategies used and the outcomes achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2020; Sandelowski, 2021). First, data reduction is carried out by selecting, simplifying, and organizing the raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, to focus on important aspects relevant to this research. This process helps in grouping information based on themes or categories that emerge from the data. Second, data presentation is carried out by compiling data that has been reduced in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, or diagrams that make it easier for researchers to see patterns and relationships between various findings. The presentation of this data allows researchers to understand the context more clearly and make more accurate interpretations. Finally, drawing conclusions and verifying is carried out by identifying the main findings, connecting them to relevant theories, and checking the validity and consistency of the data through triangulation and in-depth discussion with informants. This technique ensures that the conclusions drawn are an accurate reflection of the data that has been analyzed and can make a significant contribution to the understanding of digital marketing strategies in the educational environment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Marketing Planning at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran

In this study, the stages of digital marketing planning at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran Sragen show the important role played by careful planning in ensuring the success of digital marketing strategies. Based on interviews with the principal and marketing team, it was found that the planning process begins with the identification of the marketing goals to be achieved, the division of tasks to team members, and the determination of the digital platform to be used.

One of the informants, the principal, explained, "We always start by putting together a clear plan, including who is responsible for the content on Instagram and YouTube, and how we can attract the attention of prospective students and their parents through social media" (I_24).

Another teacher involved in the marketing team adds, "At the beginning of each school year, we plan what type of content will be uploaded, when it will be uploaded, and who will take care of it. This includes setting specific targets, such as increasing the number of followers on social media." (I_24).

Furthermore, one of the administrative staff explained, "We also consider feedback from parents and students about the content they like, and this helps us in making more effective plans for the following year." (I_24).

The results of the interview indicated that the digital marketing planning process at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran was carried out systematically and strategically. The school ensures that every step in digital marketing planning has been carefully considered, including the determination of individual responsibilities within the team and the planning of content to be uploaded on social media. The approach taken shows that this school not only focuses on day-to-day operations but also has long-term goals to be achieved, such as increasing the number of followers on social media.

Table 1: Social Media Content Strategy Plan for Junior High School NU Darul Falah Masaran

Month	Content Type	Platform	Person in Charge	Target Audience
January	School Profile Video	YouTube	Video Design Team	Prospective Students, Parents
February	Poster PPDB	Instagram	Graphic Design Team	Prospective Students, Parents
March	Photos of Student Activities	Instagram	Photography Team	Prospective Students, Community
April	Live Update on Religious Holidays	Instagram Live	Social media	Students, Parents, Public
May	Testimonials Alumni	YouTube	Interview Team	Prospective Students, Parents

The table shows a structured strategic approach to utilizing social media for school promotion. Each month, the school team plans specific types of content, such as a *school profile video* on YouTube in January, aimed at prospective students and parents, and a *New Student Admission (PPDB) poster* on Instagram in February. The content is generated by teams with specialized expertise, such as video design teams and graphic design teams, to ensure optimal visual quality and appeal. In the following months, the strategy continued with content such as photos of student activities and live updates of religious holidays on Instagram, as well as alumni testimonials on YouTube, all designed to strengthen relationships with students, parents, and the community, as well as increase the visibility and positive image of the school.

In addition, the planning carried out includes continuous evaluation, where feedback from parents and students is an important basis for future strategy adjustments. This signifies that the school is highly responsive to the needs and preferences of their audience, as well as striving to continuously improve the effectiveness of the digital marketing strategies implemented. By considering input from various parties, schools are able to design strategies that are more relevant and can adapt to the changing needs of the education market.

The strategic planning carried out by SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran reflects a key element of Kotler's theory of value-based marketing, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the needs and preferences of the target audience. By integrating feedback from stakeholders, the school is able to design more relevant and targeted strategies. This is also in line with the concept of "customer-centric marketing" which puts customer needs at the center of every marketing decision.

Organizing Digital Marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran

The process of organizing digital marketing in this school shows that a clear structure and division of roles is an important factor in the success of a digital marketing strategy. From the results of the interviews, it was revealed that the marketing team was formed by involving several teachers who have skills in social media and graphic design.

One of the teachers involved in the marketing team said, "We divide the tasks based on each other's skills. Some focus on graphic design, some take care of video content, and some are in direct contact with prospective students through social media." (I_24).

Another teacher added, "We always hold weekly meetings to ensure that all the planned content is ready and according to the set schedule." (I_24).

The administrative staff also gave their view, "With a solid team, we can respond more quickly to changes or feedback from the community. If there is inappropriate content, we can immediately change it before it is published." (I_24).

The results of the interview showed that the organization of digital marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran was carried out by a structured division of tasks based on the expertise of each team member, which allowed aspects such as graphic design, video content creation, and interaction with prospective students to be managed effectively. Team coordination is ensured through weekly meetings, where each planned content is reviewed to ensure its readiness is in accordance with the set schedule and standards. This flexibility in the organization can be seen from the team's ability to respond quickly to changes or public feedback, allowing content to be adjusted before it is published, thus maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in the midst of changing market dynamics. The following is a chart related to the structure of the digital marketing team of SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran.

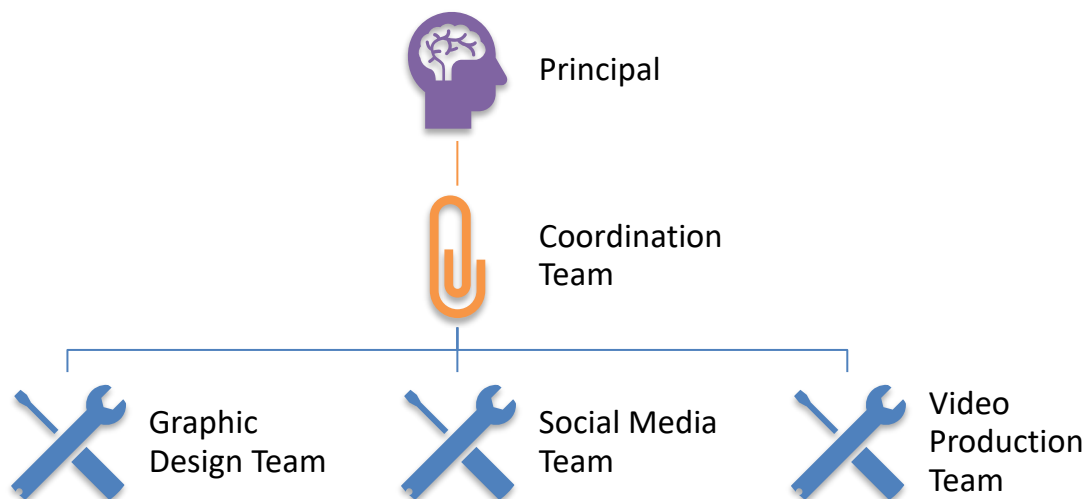


Chart 1. Structure of the Digital Marketing Team of SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran

The organizational chart labeled as "Struktur Tim Digital Marketing SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran" illustrates a clear hierarchical structure for managing the school's digital marketing efforts. At the top of the hierarchy is a symbol representing the leadership or strategic brainpower, likely the principal or the overall coordinator of the digital marketing strategy. This central figure is connected to a coordination team, depicted by a paperclip, symbolizing the linking and organizing function of this team. Below this, the structure divides into three specialized teams, each represented by tools, indicating their specific operational roles: graphic design, social media management, and video production. These teams are responsible for executing the strategic vision through their respective channels, ensuring the school's digital presence is effectively maintained and optimized across various platforms.

Implementation of Digital Marketing (Actuating) at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran

The implementation of digital marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran involves various activities designed to increase the visibility of the school and attract new students. Based on observations and interviews, it was found that this implementation includes creating and uploading content on social media, interaction with prospective students and parents, and promotion of school activities.

One of the teachers who manages the school's Instagram account explained, "We strive to create interesting and informative content, such as videos of student activities, photos of school events, and posters of registration information. The goal is for prospective students and parents to be interested in learning more about our school." (I_24).

A member of the marketing team added, "We also use Instagram Stories to share real-time updates about daily activities at school. This helps us to stay connected with our audience in a more personal and direct way." (I_24).

In addition, the principal revealed, "We evaluate every content uploaded, especially to see how big the response from the audience is. If there is content that doesn't get a lot of interaction, we try to fix it or replace it with a more appropriate one." (I_24).

The implementation of digital marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran reflects the concept of effective "content marketing", where the focus is given on creating content that is not only interesting but also has high informative value for the target audience. This is in line with the theory of "engagement marketing" which emphasizes the importance of building sustainable relationships with consumers through relevant and interactive content. Periodic evaluations of content performance demonstrate the application of the principle of "continuous improvement" in marketing management, which is especially important in a digital context where market dynamics are changing rapidly.

Digital Marketing Supervision (Controlling) at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran

Supervision or controlling is an important stage in ensuring that all digital marketing activities run according to the plan that has been set. Based on the interviews, it was found that supervision at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran was carried out through monitoring uploaded content, analyzing social media interactions, and recording feedback from users.

The principal explained, "We always monitor every post on social media to ensure that all content is in accordance with the standards we have set. We also review incoming comments and messages to make sure nothing is missed." (Interview, October 23, 2023).

The teacher in charge of audience interaction adds, "At the end of each month, we hold a meeting to discuss our social media performance, including looking at statistics such as the number of followers, the number of interactions, and the most popular types of content." (Interview, October 24, 2023).

Administrative staff also play a role in this oversight, stating, "We also record all feedback received from parents and prospective students, both through direct messages on Instagram and through the WhatsApp number we include on the poster. This helps us to continue to improve our services." (Interview, October 25, 2023).

Digital marketing supervision at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran is carried out strictly, where every upload on social media is monitored to ensure its conformity with the standards that have been set. Additionally, the marketing team regularly holds monthly meetings to review social media performance, including analyzing statistics such as the number of followers, engagement rates, and popularity of different types of content. This process is strengthened by recording and evaluating all feedback received from parents and prospective students, both through direct messages on Instagram and WhatsApp, which is used to continuously improve the quality of services and responsiveness of the school's digital marketing strategy.

Table 2: Monthly Social Media Performance Analysis

Month	Followers (Instagram)	Number of Interactions	Most Popular Content	Corrective Action
January	150	200	School Profile Video	Improve visual quality
February	160	220	Poster PPDB	Add live interactions
March	175	250	Student Activity Photos	More regular posting schedule
April	180	300	Holiday Live Update	Use Stories more often

The "Monthly Social Media Performance Analysis" table provides insight into the growth and engagement of SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran's Instagram account over several months. The data shows a steady increase in followers and interactions, with each month highlighting a particular type of popular content, such as a school profile video in January, PPDB posters in February, and alumni testimonials in May. Each month also includes specific actions for improvement based on performance analysis. For example, in January, the focus was on enhancing visual quality, while in February, the recommendation was to increase direct interactions with followers. As the months progress, the strategy evolves to include more frequent posting schedules and broader promotion of content, demonstrating a responsive and adaptive approach to optimizing the school's digital marketing efforts.

A discussion of the results of research on digital marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran shows that planning, organizing, implementing, and supervising in a systematic and structured manner has succeeded in increasing engagement on school social media. However, when these results collide with previous studies, such as the research conducted by Li et al. (2020) in the *Journal of Business Research*, it was found that the effectiveness of digital marketing is not only determined by internal strategies, but also by external factors such as technology trends and changing consumer preferences. In addition, a study by Kannan and Li (2021) in the *Journal of Marketing* revealed that interaction and personalization are the keys to success in digital marketing, which is in line with the findings of this study regarding the importance of direct interaction and quick response to audience feedback. However, another study by Lee and Kotler (2022) in the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* shows that long-term success in digital marketing relies heavily on consistent content innovation, something that although it has begun to be implemented at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran, still needs further improvement in terms of content diversification and creativity. This overall result confirms that although the school's digital marketing strategy is already on track, adaptation to external dynamics and more diverse content innovations will further increase its effectiveness.

This research makes a significant contribution in the field of education management, especially related to digital marketing strategies in educational institutions. First, this study reveals the importance of careful and data-driven planning in the implementation of digital marketing, which can be a guideline for other schools to improve the effectiveness of their promotion and branding in the digital era. Second, by showing how efficient team organizing, based on specialized expertise, can improve the effectiveness of marketing strategies, this study offers new insights into human resource management in the context of education. Third, this study shows the importance of continuous evaluation and responsiveness to feedback from the audience, which is a crucial aspect in the development of adaptive and innovative marketing strategies. Overall, this study not only provides a practical model for the implementation of digital marketing in schools, but also enriches the education management literature with relevant approaches to improve the competitiveness of educational institutions in an increasingly competitive digital landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the implementation of digital marketing at SMP NU Darul Falah Masaran, which is carried out through strategic planning, structured organization, creative content implementation, and strict supervision, has succeeded in increasing school engagement and visibility on social media. These findings emphasize the importance of a holistic and sustainable approach in digital marketing strategies in educational institutions. The main lesson that can be learned is that the success of digital marketing depends not only on engaging content, but also on how the institution prepares, implements, and evaluates the strategy on an ongoing basis. This provides new insights that the integration between responsiveness to audience feedback and content innovation is key in maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of marketing strategies in a rapidly changing environment.

This research makes a significant contribution in the field of education management by enriching literature related to digital marketing strategies in educational institutions. Through in-depth analysis and application of marketing theory in the context of education, this research renews the existing perspective by highlighting the importance of a more systematic and adaptive approach. In addition, this study introduces important variables such as audience feedback as a key element in digital marketing success that has not been raised much before in the context of education. However, the study also has limitations, especially because its focus on only one school in a given region, which may not be fully representative of the diverse contexts of other educational institutions. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the implementation of digital marketing in different types of educational institutions, taking into account differences in gender, age, and other marketing methods to gain more comprehensive and reliable insights for more effective education policymaking.

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