

Madrasah and Pesantren Branding: Building the Image of Excellent Islamic Educational Institutions

Asep Ariffudin¹, Emil Maliki², Siti Patimah³, Rifyal Ahmad Lughowi⁴

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia

³Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia

⁴Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Madrasahs and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia face both challenges and opportunities in building and maintaining their image as excellent educational institutions in an era of global competition and digitalization. This article aimed to analyze effective branding strategies for Islamic educational institutions by integrating Islamic values as core values. Utilizing a systematic literature review approach, this study examines recent literature on marketing management and educational branding in Islamic contexts. The analysis indicates that constructing an institutional image of excellence requires a paradigm shift from traditional institutions to professionally managed entities. Key strategies include: (1) formulating differentiation based on the integration of general science and religious studies, (2) implementing integrated image communication through digital branding and public relations, and (3) maintaining a balance between da'wah (proselytization) orientation and managerial professionalism. The article concludes that the success of madrasah and pesantren branding depends on their ability to consistently articulate an authentic brand identity across all communication channels. The practical implication of this study is a conceptual model that institutional managers can adopt to enhance competitiveness and public image. Future research is recommended to empirically test the effectiveness of these strategies and explore stakeholder perceptions in depth.

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Corresponding Author:

Asep Ariffudin

Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University of Banten, Indonesia

Email: asepariffudi7@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of education in Indonesia, specifically the Islamic education sector represented by madrasahs and pesantren, is undergoing a significant transformation. Historically, these institutions were often perceived as alternatives or even "second-tier" options, focusing solely on religious education and offering limited facilities. However, a paradigm shift in public perception is underway[1], [2]. The public increasingly views modern madrasahs and pesantren not only as institutions that excel in religious character formation, but also as entities capable of competing

academically and offering specialized programs such as Tahfizh Al-Qur'an (Qur'anic memorization), integrative sciences, and foreign language mastery[3], [4]. This shift is driven by a growing awareness of the importance of holistic education alongside the demands of the global and digital era, which require every institution to clearly demonstrate its identity and competitive advantages.

In this context of intensifying competition, branding has become an indispensable strategic necessity[5]. Branding extends beyond logos or slogans; it encompasses the process of building perception, reputation, and brand equity in the minds of stakeholders, including prospective students, parents, the community, and the government[6]. Nevertheless, a gap remains between institutional potential and professional image management. Some madrasahs and pesantren still struggle with the stigma of traditionalism and a lack of systematic reputation management[2]. Meanwhile, institutions that have initiated branding efforts often face a dilemma between maintaining the values of sincerity (ikhlas) and da'wah versus the demand to market themselves competitively[7]. Therefore, the research problem of this article is formulated as follows: How can effective branding strategies be formulated and implemented by madrasahs and pesantren to build an image as excellent Islamic educational institutions without sacrificing their core Islamic values? What critical success factors must be taken into consideration?

The objective of this article is to elucidate a comprehensive model and strategy for developing brand identity and brand image in Islamic educational institutions, specifically madrasahs and pesantren. This explanation is based on a synthesis of theories and empirical findings from recent studies. Theoretical contributions are expected to enrich the literature on Islamic educational management, particularly in institutional marketing and communication. Practically, this article serves as a guide for administrators of madrasahs, pesantren, and similar Islamic educational institutions in designing and executing contextual and effective branding strategies.

In the educational context, branding is defined as a strategic process of creating and managing a set of unique associations attached to an institution. Key concepts include brand identity (the intended identity communicated by the organization), brand image (the brand perception formed in the public mind), and brand equity (the added value possessed by the brand)[8]. For non-profit organizations such as madrasahs and pesantren, branding plays a crucial role in building legitimacy, attracting resources (such as students and donors), and maintaining community loyalty[9]. Educational branding does not merely market services; it primarily conveys values, experiences, and promised futures to learners.[10]

The uniqueness of madrasahs and pesantren lies in the deep integration of general knowledge (kauniyyah) and religious knowledge (syar'iyah). Their core values often stem from rich Islamic traditions, including the cultivation of noble character (akhlaq al-karimah), simplicity, devotion to spiritual leaders (kiai) or teachers, and an independent spirit nurtured within the boarding environment[11], [12]. For instance, the Tahfizh Al-Qur'an tradition has evolved into one of the most prominent and sought-after brand images in modern Islamic education[3], [4]. These values provide the foundation for an authentic brand identity that is difficult for general educational institutions to replicate.

To establish a consistent image, institutions must adopt an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) approach. IMC emphasizes aligning all communication messages and channels ranging from websites, social media, and brochures to staff behavior and direct parental experiences to convey a coherent identity[13], [14]. In the digital era, this approach extends to digital branding, where social media and online content play a central role in shaping narratives and engaging the public[15], [16]. Furthermore, reputation management through active public relations (PR), such as publishing academic achievements and community service activities, is critical for establishing credibility and trust[1], [17].

2. METHOD

This article was constructed using a qualitative research method with a systematic literature review approach. This approach was selected to synthesize findings from various recent empirical and conceptual studies to develop a comprehensive understanding and conceptual model of branding in Islamic educational institutions. The primary data sources consist of scientific journal articles,

theses, and academic publications published over the last decade[1], focusing on the Indonesian context. The literature selection process considered topic relevance regarding branding, image, marketing, or communication in madrasahs, pesantren, or Islamic education in general.

The data analysis technique employed was content analysis based on the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data gathered from various sources were categorized into key emerging themes, such as: the urgency of branding, core value formulation, digital communication strategies, the role of stakeholders, and associated challenges. These themes were analyzed to identify patterns, relationships, and research gaps, which were ultimately synthesized into a coherent discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Paradigm Shift: From Traditional to Professional

Findings from various studies confirm a paradigm shift in the management of madrasahs and pesantren. Institutions recognize that religious excellence alone is no longer sufficient to remain competitive. The public demands institutions that are not only spiritually sound but also academically, managerially, and operationally superior[1], [2]. Consequently, branding is viewed as a strategic imperative to shift public perception from a "second-tier option" to a "first choice". As highlighted in prior research, professional image management indicates that an Islamic educational institution is committed to delivering quality services and adapting to contemporary advancements[5]. However, this paradigm shift must be executed carefully to avoid commercialization that could erode fundamental values of sincerity (ikhlas) and da'wah[7].

3.2. Formulating Differentiation and Authentic Core Values

The key to successful madrasah and pesantren branding lies in the capacity to define and communicate authentic differentiation. This differentiation must be rooted in their distinct strength: value integration. Prominent differentiation models identified from the literature include: Tahfizh Plus: Establishing Tahfizh Al-Qur'an programs as the primary brand image, supported by a competitive general curriculum[3], [4]. Islamic Science and Technology: Offering a science education framework integrated with Islamic values, backed by adequate laboratory infrastructure. Entrepreneurial Pesantren: Building a brand image centered on entrepreneurship by engaging students (santri) in productive business units. Language-Based Pesantren: Emphasizing mastery of Arabic and English as an academic advantage for global communication[12].

These core values must be embedded into all operational aspects, including the curriculum, organizational culture (such as the kiai-santri relationship), and physical facilities, thereby forming a consistent brand experience for all stakeholders[14], [18].

3.3. Image Communication Strategies: A Multichannel Approach

Once core values are established, the next step is communicating them effectively. Literature synthesis indicates that successful strategies adopt a multichannel approach: Digital Branding: Utilizing social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube), informative and interactive official websites, and creative content creation (profile videos, event documentations, testimonials) is vital for reaching the public, particularly younger generations and millennial parents[15], [16]. Digital branding enables broad, cost-effective dissemination of positive narratives[19]. Public Relations and Media Coverage: Building positive relationships with news media to publicize academic and non-academic achievements, social initiatives, and institutional innovations. Successful alumni also serve as powerful PR assets for generating testimonials and network growth[9], [20]. Visual and Experiential Branding: A professional visual identity (logo, color scheme, uniforms) alongside clean, safe, and presentable physical facilities contributes to the perception of quality[13]. Additionally, high service standards and welcoming interactions from all staff and educators form direct experiences that shape public image.

3.4. Challenges and Balance in Branding

Implementing a branding strategy presents several notable challenges: Human Resource Constraints: Many pesantren and madrasahs face limited human resources skilled in digital marketing management and modern communication[7]. Value Dilemma: Balancing the necessity of marketing the institution with maintaining spiritual sincerity (ikhhlās) and preventing excessive commercialization that could provoke internal conflict[6]. Consistency: Ensuring that externally communicated branding messages align with actual internal experiences. Discrepancies can diminish credibility and cause a crisis of trust.

3.5. Conceptual Model for Branding Excellent Islamic Educational Institutions

Based on the discussion above, a conceptual model for branding madrasahs and pesantren is outlined as follows: Planning Phase: Identify unique core values and differentiation based on science-religion integration. Conduct stakeholder analysis to assess expectations. Formulation Phase: Design a brand identity (name, logo, slogan, narrative) reflecting core values. Develop an IMC strategy combining digital tools, PR, and experiential elements. Implementation Phase: Maintain consistent communication across all channels. Engage the academic community (teachers, staff, students, alumni) as brand ambassadors. Leverage achievements and activities to foster positive narratives. Evaluation Phase: Monitor image and reputation via parental feedback, social media engagement, and satisfaction surveys. Make periodic strategic adjustments. The overall outcome of madrasah and pesantren branding is inherently linked to institutional quality. A robust brand is built not solely through logos, slogans, social media, or promotions, but through the synthesis of strong Islamic values, authentic excellence, professional management, effective communication, service quality, and positive stakeholder experiences. In this framework, Islamic values serve as the foundational identity, while modern management and technology act as instruments to express and advance that identity. Therefore, ideal branding for madrasahs and pesantren does not imitate other institutions, but rather professionally presents and communicates their distinct advantages without relinquishing their Islamic identity and heritage.

The conceptual model for branding excellent Islamic educational institutions (madrasahs and pesantren) is structured around four sequential phases: planning, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. In the planning phase, institutions identify unique core values—particularly the integration of general knowledge and Islamic sciences—and conduct stakeholder analyses to map the expectations of parents, students, teachers, and the surrounding community. This step ensures that institutional positioning is not only conceptually strong but also relevant to stakeholders' real needs, thereby building the brand foundation on authentic values and clear differentiation[21].

In the formulation phase, brand identity elements (name, logo, slogan, narrative) are designed to reflect these core values, followed by the development of an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) strategy that combines digital channels, public relations, and experiential components such as flagship programs and student achievements. This strategy emphasizes message consistency and channel integration so that the institution's image is formed coherently, while simultaneously strengthening internal identity as a character-driven and competitive institution. Thus, branding becomes more than promotional activity; it is a strategic alignment of identity, communication, and educational service experience[22].

The implementation phase requires consistent communication across all channels and the active involvement of the academic community—teachers, staff, students, and alumni—as brand ambassadors who disseminate positive narratives through tangible achievements and activities. Such involvement transforms branding into a collective movement rather than a marketing department task, ensuring that every interaction with stakeholders becomes an opportunity to reinforce institutional reputation. Within this framework, Islamic values serve as the foundational identity, while modern management and technology function as instruments to express and advance that identity professionally.

The evaluation phase involves monitoring institutional image and reputation through parental feedback, social media engagement, and stakeholder satisfaction surveys, which then inform periodic strategic adjustments. The ultimate outcome of madrasah and pesantren branding is

inherently linked to institutional quality: a strong brand is built not merely through logos or promotions, but through a synthesis of robust Islamic values, authentic excellence, professional management, effective communication, service quality, and positive stakeholder experiences. Therefore, ideal branding does not imitate other institutions but professionally presents and communicates distinctive advantages without relinquishing Islamic identity and heritage[23].

Overall, this model underscores that branding Islamic educational institutions is an institutional strategy grounded in values, experience, reputation, and public trust—not merely a promotional exercise. By positioning Islamic values as the foundational identity and leveraging modern management and technology as expressive tools, madrasahs and pesantren can build authentic, competitive, and sustainable brands amid increasingly fierce educational competition[24].

4. CONCLUSION

This article has addressed the significance, strategies, and challenges of establishing the brand of madrasahs and pesantren as superior Islamic educational institutions. The primary conclusion is that branding success relies heavily on an institution's ability to creatively integrate authentic Islamic values with modern requirements of professionalism and innovation. A paradigm shift toward systematic and strategic image management is essential. Core strategies involve formulating differentiation grounded in unique core values, executing integrated communication across digital and non-digital channels, and involving all stakeholders. Above all, alignment between the brand promise and the tangible experiences delivered to students and parents is paramount.

Based on the conclusions of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to strengthen the branding practices of madrasahs and pesantren in responding to the increasingly competitive and digitally mediated educational environment. Institutional branding should not be understood merely as a promotional activity, but as an integrated strategic process that reflects the institution's identity, values, educational quality, and long-term vision. Therefore, the development of branding strategies needs to be aligned with the substantive quality of educational services so that the institutional image communicated to the public corresponds to the actual experience of students, parents, alumni, teachers, and the wider community.

For institutional administrators, particularly those responsible for managing madrasahs and pesantren, it is recommended that dedicated teams or communication units be established to manage institutional branding in a systematic and sustainable manner. These teams should consist of personnel who possess competencies in digital communication, content creation, public relations, social media management, and institutional communication. Where dedicated teams cannot yet be established, institutions should provide relevant training and professional development for teachers and administrative staff so that they are able to communicate institutional programs and achievements effectively through digital platforms. This capacity building is important because the effectiveness of contemporary branding increasingly depends on the ability of educational institutions to communicate their identity through credible, informative, engaging, and consistent digital content.

Madrasahs and pesantren should also develop comprehensive brand guidelines to ensure consistency in the presentation of their institutional identity. Such guidelines may include the use of logos, colors, typography, visual materials, institutional narratives, communication styles, and the representation of Islamic values across different communication channels. Consistency does not mean that all institutional communication must be rigid or identical; rather, it ensures that various forms of communication continue to convey a coherent institutional identity. A consistent brand identity can contribute to strengthening public recognition and distinguishing one institution from other educational providers operating within the same competitive environment.

At the same time, branding strategies should remain firmly rooted in the distinctive Islamic identity of madrasahs and pesantren. Institutional administrators should avoid adopting commercial branding practices without considering their compatibility with Islamic educational principles. Branding should instead be positioned as a means of communicating the institution's genuine educational strengths, Islamic character, moral values, traditions, and commitment to educational excellence. In this context, successful branding is not necessarily determined by the extent to which

an institution resembles modern commercial organizations, but by its ability to communicate its unique identity in a professional, authentic, and relevant manner. The integration of Islamic values with contemporary management and communication practices can therefore become an important foundation for developing a distinctive and sustainable institutional brand.

Institutions are further encouraged to strengthen their relationships with alumni, parents, community leaders, educational partners, and other relevant stakeholders. Alumni networks, in particular, can become strategic assets in strengthening institutional reputation because alumni experiences can provide authentic evidence of the educational outcomes and values developed by the institution. Testimonials, alumni achievements, community contributions, and graduate success stories can be communicated through institutional websites, social media, newsletters, and other digital platforms. However, such communication should be based on factual experiences and ethical representation rather than exaggerated promotional claims. Authenticity is essential because public trust can be weakened when the institutional image presented through branding does not correspond with actual educational practices.

Another important recommendation concerns the integration of branding with the improvement of educational quality. Branding cannot compensate for weaknesses in academic services, teacher competence, student development, infrastructure, governance, or institutional management. Consequently, institutional administrators should ensure that branding initiatives are accompanied by continuous quality improvement. The programs, achievements, facilities, and values promoted through institutional communication should be supported by tangible evidence and actual institutional performance. In this respect, branding should function as a reflection of quality rather than a substitute for quality. This approach can help institutions build a reputation based on credibility, consistency, and long-term public trust.

The use of digital media should also be accompanied by clear ethical principles. Madrasahs and pesantren need to pay attention to accuracy, privacy, intellectual property, responsible content production, and respectful communication when utilizing social media and other digital platforms. Content involving students, teachers, parents, and other members of the institutional community should be published responsibly and with appropriate consideration of consent and privacy. Digital branding should also avoid excessive sensationalism, misleading information, unrealistic claims, or content that prioritizes popularity over educational substance. Ethical digital communication is particularly important for Islamic educational institutions because their public image is closely associated with moral credibility and religious values.

In addition, institutional branding should be evaluated periodically to determine whether communication strategies are effectively reaching the intended audiences. Administrators can utilize various indicators, such as engagement with digital content, website visits, public responses, enrollment trends, stakeholder feedback, alumni participation, and community perceptions. Evaluation should not focus exclusively on quantitative indicators such as the number of followers or social media interactions. Qualitative indicators, including public trust, perceived credibility, satisfaction, institutional reputation, and alignment between the projected brand identity and stakeholders' actual experiences, should also be considered. Through continuous evaluation, institutions can identify weaknesses, adjust communication strategies, and ensure that branding remains relevant to changing societal expectations.

For future researchers, further empirical studies are recommended to examine and evaluate the proposed branding conceptual model within specific madrasah and pesantren contexts. Because branding practices may differ according to institutional size, geographical location, educational orientation, organizational culture, and available resources, empirical research can provide a more nuanced understanding of how branding strategies operate in different institutional settings. Quantitative studies could examine relationships between branding dimensions and outcomes such as institutional reputation, parental trust, student enrollment, satisfaction, and institutional competitiveness. Meanwhile, qualitative studies could explore how administrators, teachers, students, parents, alumni, and community members interpret institutional branding and how these interpretations influence institutional reputation.

Future research should also investigate parents' perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction as important outcomes of institutional branding strategies. Parents are among the most significant stakeholders in educational decision-making, and their perceptions may influence institutional choice, loyalty, recommendations, and long-term relationships with educational institutions. Research examining parental decision-making could explore how factors such as Islamic identity, educational quality, institutional reputation, digital presence, tuition costs, facilities, student achievement, and alumni outcomes interact in shaping parents' preferences. Such studies would provide valuable evidence for institutions seeking to develop branding strategies that are responsive to the needs and expectations of their primary stakeholders.

Further studies could also investigate the role of students and alumni in the formation of institutional brand identity. Students are not merely recipients of educational services but also participants in the construction and dissemination of institutional reputation. Their experiences, achievements, and interactions with the institution can influence how the public perceives the madrasah or pesantren. Similarly, alumni can become important brand ambassadors when they demonstrate positive educational outcomes and maintain meaningful relationships with their former institutions. Research focusing on these stakeholder groups could therefore contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of branding as a participatory process rather than a communication strategy controlled solely by institutional administrators.

Another important area for future research is the relationship between institutional branding, financial sustainability, and commercialization. Madrasahs and pesantren require adequate resources to maintain educational quality, develop infrastructure, adopt digital technologies, and improve human resource competencies. Nevertheless, the pursuit of financial sustainability should not result in the excessive commercialization of Islamic education or weaken the institution's religious mission. Future research could therefore explore alternative business models, fundraising strategies, alumni-based resource mobilization, social entrepreneurship, partnerships, and other sustainable financing mechanisms that enable Islamic educational institutions to strengthen their organizational capacity while preserving their educational and religious identity.

Future researchers are also encouraged to conduct comparative studies between madrasahs, pesantren, and other educational institutions to identify similarities and differences in branding strategies. Comparative research could examine how institutional characteristics, organizational culture, leadership styles, technological adoption, and stakeholder structures influence branding effectiveness. Such research would provide a broader theoretical basis for understanding whether branding models developed in general educational institutions can be directly applied to Islamic educational institutions or whether they require contextual adaptation.

Finally, future studies should consider developing and testing measurable instruments for assessing Islamic educational institutional branding. A validated instrument could include dimensions such as Islamic identity, educational quality, institutional reputation, digital communication, stakeholder engagement, authenticity, organizational culture, and public trust. The availability of such an instrument would enable researchers and institutional administrators to evaluate branding systematically and compare branding performance across institutions and contexts. In this way, future research can move beyond conceptual discussions toward evidence-based models that provide practical guidance for the sustainable development of madrasahs and pesantren.

Overall, the recommendations emphasize that institutional branding in madrasahs and pesantren should be developed as a strategic, ethical, and quality-oriented process. Branding should strengthen, rather than replace, the substantive quality of Islamic education. By integrating professional communication, digital innovation, stakeholder engagement, Islamic values, continuous quality improvement, and responsible management, madrasahs and pesantren can develop institutional identities that are distinctive, credible, and sustainable. Such an approach can enable Islamic educational institutions to respond to contemporary competition while maintaining the religious, moral, and educational foundations that constitute their core identity.

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