

Integrated School Branding Strategies for Rebuilding Public Trust: A Case Study of an Islamic Private Junior High School in Indonesia

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Abstract. Public trust is a key factor influencing the sustainability and competitiveness of private schools. This study examines the integrated school branding strategies implemented by SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan to rebuild public trust following a decline in student enrollment. A qualitative case study approach was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving 15 purposively selected participants, including school leaders, foundation representatives, teachers, administrative staff, the student admission committee, and a school committee representative. Observations and document analysis complemented the interview data. Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. The findings identified five integrated branding strategies: (1) strengthening school identity through alignment of vision, graduate competencies, and school culture; (2) expanding partnerships with government, community, industry, and international institutions; (3) promoting academic and non-academic achievements; (4) improving student admission services through scholarships, responsive communication, and service excellence; and (5) implementing integrated promotional communication combining digital branding, experiential marketing, and positive word-of-mouth. These strategies enhanced institutional reputation, stakeholder engagement, and student enrollment. The study concludes that sustainable public trust is built through the integration of institutional identity, educational quality, stakeholder collaboration, service excellence, and strategic communication.

Keywords: school branding, public trust, private schools, educational marketing, institutional reputation, case study

1 Introduction

Private schools represent a form of community participation in the provision of national education and play an important role in expanding access to and improving the quality of educational services. In recent years, increasing competition among educational institutions has required private schools not only to provide high-quality learning experiences but also to establish public trust through a strong reputation, institutional identity, and distinctive value that differentiates them from other schools [1], [2]. This

competitive environment has intensified as parents have become more selective in choosing schools based on various considerations, including educational quality, alignment with family values, affordability, learning environment, and opportunities for students' character development and academic achievement. Consequently, private schools are expected to develop strategies that extend beyond improving internal quality and focus on shaping positive public perceptions of the institution [3].

One strategy that has received growing attention in educational management is school branding. School branding refers to a strategic process of building and strengthening a school's identity, image, and positioning so that it becomes recognizable, distinctive, and trusted by the public. Within the educational context, branding is not merely a promotional activity but rather a reflection of educational quality, organizational culture, institutional achievements, and the school's consistency in meeting the expectations of stakeholders. A strong brand enables schools to create meaningful differentiation, thereby enhancing their competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic educational market [4], [5].

Previous studies have identified several factors that contribute to successful school branding, including continuous improvement of educational services, the development of a positive school culture, the implementation of distinctive flagship programs, effective public communication, and the optimization of public relations to strengthen institutional reputation [6]. In addition, differentiation strategies play a critical role by enabling schools to offer unique values that cannot easily be replicated by competing institutions. From the perspective of value creation, schools are expected to continuously generate, develop, and sustain value through high-quality educational services, innovative programs, and long-term partnerships, thereby establishing sustainable competitive advantages [7].

Despite these efforts, many private schools continue to face challenges in maintaining public trust. Limited innovation, weak program differentiation, and inconsistent service quality often result in declining institutional reputation, which subsequently reduces student enrollment. Statistical data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Balikpapan indicate a decline in new student enrollment among private junior high schools during the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 academic years [8]. This trend reflects the increasing challenges faced by private educational institutions in attracting prospective students and maintaining their competitiveness.

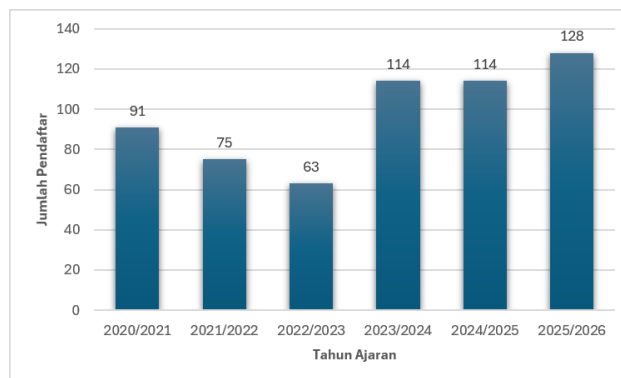


Figure 1. Trend of New Student Enrollment in Private Junior High Schools in Balikpapan City (Academic Years 2023/2024–2024/2025)

The decline in student enrollment suggests that private schools need to continuously innovate and strengthen their institutional competitiveness. Without sustained improvements in educational quality, program differentiation, and stakeholder engagement, public confidence may weaken, ultimately threatening institutional sustainability [9]. Public trust reflects the community's confidence in a school's competence, integrity, consistency, and commitment to delivering educational services that meet the expectations of parents and students. In the educational context, trust is demonstrated through parents' decisions to enroll their children, recommend the school to others, and maintain long-term relationships with the institution [10]. Therefore, school branding should not be viewed solely as a marketing strategy but also as a strategic mechanism for strengthening institutional legitimacy and fostering enduring relationships between schools and the communities they serve.

SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan provides an illustrative example of this phenomenon. The school experienced a substantial decline in student enrollment, with new admissions reaching only approximately 50% of its available capacity. In response, the school implemented a comprehensive branding transformation that included strengthening its institutional identity, introducing innovative flagship programs, improving educational service quality, enhancing public communication, and fostering stronger relationships with the surrounding community. Following the implementation of these initiatives, student enrollment gradually increased, indicating a recovery in public trust toward the institution [11].

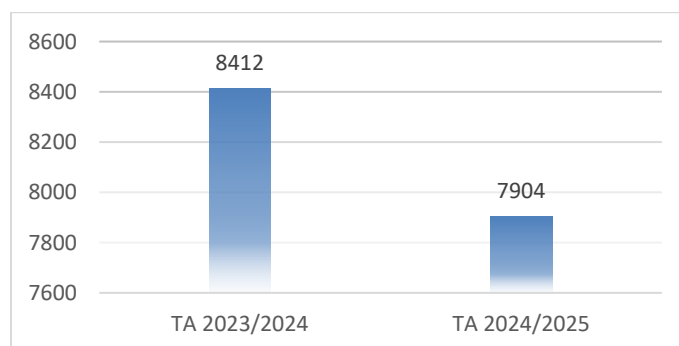


Figure 2. New Student Enrollment at SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan Before and After the Implementation of the School Branding Strategy

The improvement shown in Figure 2 demonstrates that a well-planned branding strategy, supported by educational quality enhancement and effective stakeholder communication, can contribute to rebuilding public trust and increasing student enrollment. This case highlights the importance of branding not only as a promotional instrument but also as a strategic approach to institutional recovery and long-term sustainability.

Although numerous studies have examined school branding, most have focused primarily on promotional strategies, marketing communication, institutional image development, or public relations practices [12]. Limited attention has been given to understanding how school branding functions as a comprehensive recovery strategy for rebuilding public trust in private schools experiencing declining student enrollment. Consequently, there remains a significant research gap regarding the mechanisms through which branding strategies restore institutional credibility and improve the competitiveness of private educational institutions [13].

Unlike previous studies, this research investigates school branding as a strategic process for restoring public trust in a private school that experienced declining competitiveness. By employing a qualitative case study approach, the study explores how branding strategies were designed, implemented, and sustained to recover institutional reputation and public confidence. The findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the relationship between school branding and public trust while providing practical guidance for school leaders and policymakers in developing sustainable branding strategies to strengthen the competitiveness of private schools.

Based on this background, the study aims to analyze the branding strategies implemented by SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan to rebuild public trust and to identify the key factors contributing to the successful implementation of these strategies in enhancing the competitiveness and long-term sustainability of private schools.

2 Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the school branding strategies implemented by SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan to rebuild public trust. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and to explore the interactions among organizational strategies, stakeholder perceptions, and institutional outcomes. The study focused on the school's branding initiatives, including strengthening institutional identity, developing flagship programs, enhancing academic and non-academic achievements, expanding strategic partnerships, and implementing communication and public engagement strategies [14].

2.2 Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. The school was purposively selected because it experienced a significant decline in new student enrollment before successfully restoring public trust through a comprehensive school branding strategy. This institutional transformation provided an appropriate context for examining how branding contributes to rebuilding public trust and improving the competitiveness of private schools. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in planning, implementing, and evaluating the school's branding initiatives. A total of 15 participants were involved in the study, comprising the principal ($n = 1$), foundation representatives ($n = 2$), the Student Admission Committee (SPMB) coordinator ($n = 1$), vice principals ($n = 3$), teachers ($n = 5$), administrative staff ($n = 2$), and one representative of the school committee ($n = 1$). The number of participants was considered adequate because data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, at which point no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the school's branding strategy. The emphasis on internal stakeholders reflects the study's objective of understanding organizational processes and strategic decision-making rather than measuring public perceptions. External perspectives were incorporated through a school committee representative, documentary evidence, and observational data.

2.3 Data Sources and Data Collection

The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the fifteen participants to explore their experiences and perspectives regarding the formulation, implementation, challenges, and outcomes of the school's branding strategy. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and was conducted face-to-face using an interview guide while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on relevant issues. Secondary data consisted of school strategic plans, annual work programs, student admission (SPMB) records, school achievement reports, partnership agreements, promotional

brochures, official website and social media publications, photographs, and other institutional documents related to branding activities [4].

Data collection was carried out using three complementary techniques: interviews, observations, and document analysis. Non-participant observations were conducted to examine how branding was reflected in school culture, educational services, flagship programs, school facilities, and interactions between the school and the community. Document analysis was undertaken to validate and enrich the findings obtained from interviews and observations by reviewing institutional records, promotional materials, achievement documentation, partnership reports, and annual student enrollment statistics.

In this study, public trust was operationalized as stakeholders' confidence in the school's competence, integrity, consistency, and commitment to delivering quality educational services. Because this research employed a qualitative case study design, public trust was not measured using a standardized survey instrument. Instead, it was inferred through triangulation of multiple qualitative indicators, including participants' perceptions expressed during interviews, evidence of positive parental recommendations and stakeholder engagement observed during fieldwork, institutional documents demonstrating expanded partnerships and school achievements, and student enrollment records that reflected institutional recovery following the implementation of the branding strategy.

2.4 Trustworthiness of the Data

The trustworthiness of the findings was established through source triangulation and method triangulation by comparing information obtained from different participants and multiple data collection techniques. Credibility was further enhanced through prolonged engagement at the research site and member checking with selected participants to verify the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. To strengthen dependability and confirmability, regular peer debriefing sessions were conducted among the research team throughout the analytical process. During these discussions, emerging codes, themes, and interpretations were critically reviewed until consensus was reached, thereby reducing individual researcher bias. Although formal inter-coder agreement statistics were not calculated, the collaborative coding and continuous analytical discussions ensured consistency in data interpretation and strengthened the overall trustworthiness of the findings.

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process, allowing emerging categories and themes to be continuously refined. During the data condensation stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded and categorized according to recurring patterns related to school branding practices. The categorized data were subsequently organized into thematic displays to facilitate interpretation and comparison across data sources. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified through triangulation and member checking to ensure

the consistency and credibility of the findings. The analysis focused on identifying branding strategies that contributed to rebuilding public trust, particularly through strengthening institutional identity, improving educational service quality, developing flagship programs, expanding strategic partnerships, enhancing stakeholder communication, and increasing new student enrolment [15].

3 Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The findings indicate that the branding strategy implemented by SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan is an integrated management process rather than a series of promotional activities. The strategy consists of five interconnected components: (1) strengthening school identity, (2) expanding strategic partnerships, (3) achievement-based branding, (4) strengthening student admission services (SPMB), and (5) integrated promotional communication. These components collectively contribute to rebuilding public trust and increasing student enrollment. The conceptual framework of the branding strategy is presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Integrated School Branding Strategy at SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan

3.2. Strengthening School Identity

The findings reveal that strengthening the school's identity constitutes the foundation of the branding strategy at SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan. Rather than relying solely on promotional slogans, the school embeds its vision through the tagline *The Excellent Qur'anic Leader and Entrepreneur School*, which is systematically translated into graduate competency standards, school culture, and learning programs. Consequently, the school's identity is reflected in students' educational experiences and parents' perceptions of educational quality.

One participant explained:

“Our graduate quality is reflected in the tagline ‘The Excellent Qur’anic Leader and Entrepreneur School.’ The tagline originates from the school’s vision and is translated into the graduate competency standards.”

These findings indicate that branding begins with institutional identity rather than promotional activities. A consistent relationship between institutional values, educational practices, and service quality enables stakeholders to recognize the school's distinctive characteristics and strengthens its credibility. Previous studies have similarly argued that effective educational branding depends on organizational identity being consistently reflected in stakeholders' experiences. Therefore, school identity functions as the foundation upon which institutional reputation and public trust are gradually established.

3.2 Expanding Strategic Partnerships

Another important branding strategy identified in this study is the development of strategic partnerships. SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan strengthens its institutional reputation through collaborations with government agencies, private organizations, community institutions, and international educational networks. One of its flagship initiatives is the **Belajar Bersama Masyarakat (BBM)** program, which provides students with authentic learning experiences in real-world settings while simultaneously strengthening relationships between the school and external stakeholders.

The school has also established formal partnerships through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and participated in the **Australia–Indonesia BRIDGE Program**, expanding its international educational network. According to one participant:

“For international networking, we participate in the BRIDGE Program. At the local level, we collaborate with libraries, parents’ institutions, businesses, and community partners that support the implementation of the BBM program.”

These partnerships enhance the school's credibility by demonstrating its commitment to collaborative learning and community engagement. Beyond supporting educational programs, strategic partnerships increase institutional visibility, broaden access to external resources, and reinforce the school's image as an innovative educational institution.

3.3 Achievement-Based Branding

The findings further reveal that school achievements serve as tangible evidence of educational quality and represent a significant component of the branding strategy. Achievement-based branding is implemented through a systematic culture of excellence involving students, teachers, and the institution. Academic and non-academic achievements are continuously developed through structured coaching programs and

participation in competitions at local, national, and international levels. One participant stated:

“When students achieve success and the school receives recognition, it becomes evidence that the community increasingly trusts the school.”

Unlike promotional claims, achievements provide objective indicators that reduce uncertainty among prospective parents when selecting schools. The findings suggest that institutional reputation is strengthened when achievements are consistently communicated through various media. Consequently, achievements function not only as educational outcomes but also as strategic branding assets that reinforce school credibility and public trust.

3.4. Strengthening Student Admission Services (SPMB)

The study found that branding is also strengthened through high-quality student admission services. SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan considers the admission process as the first point of interaction between the school and prospective parents, making service quality a critical determinant of public perception.

The school enhances its admission services through scholarship programs, responsive communication, service excellence, and integrated educational pathways across its elementary, junior, and senior high school levels. These initiatives provide added value for prospective students while creating positive first impressions of the institution.

The findings indicate that admission services should not be viewed merely as administrative procedures but as opportunities to establish trust and demonstrate institutional professionalism. Positive experiences during the admission process contribute to parents' confidence and increase the likelihood of enrollment and future recommendations.

3.5. Integrated Promotional Communication

The findings demonstrate that SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan employs an integrated promotional communication strategy combining digital media, experiential marketing, and word-of-mouth communication. The school actively disseminates information through its website and social media platforms while maintaining conventional promotional channels such as brochures, banners, and billboards to reach diverse segments of the community.

One participant explained:

“We use every promotional medium available—from billboards, banners, and brochures to websites, Instagram, Facebook, and collaborations with local influencers—because we never know where prospective parents will first encounter our school.”

The school also organizes open houses, school tours, educational exhibitions, and student competitions, enabling prospective parents and students to directly experience the school's learning environment. These activities strengthen institutional credibility by allowing stakeholders to observe educational quality firsthand.

Furthermore, positive recommendations from parents and alumni emerged as the most influential communication channel. The findings indicate that satisfied parents voluntarily share their experiences with relatives and colleagues, generating organic promotion that significantly strengthens public trust. This suggests that effective word-of-mouth communication is not created through marketing campaigns alone but results from consistently delivering high-quality educational services.

3.6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that school branding should be understood as an integrated strategic management process rather than merely a promotional activity. The five interconnected strategies identified in this study—strengthening school identity, expanding strategic partnerships, achievement-based branding, improving student admission services, and implementing integrated promotional communication—collectively contributed to rebuilding public trust and increasing student enrolment [16], [17], [18]. These findings suggest that effective branding in educational institutions is developed through the alignment of institutional values, educational quality, stakeholder engagement, and consistent service delivery. Consequently, branding becomes embedded in the school's organizational culture and everyday practices rather than being limited to marketing campaigns [19], [20].

This study extends previous research on school branding by showing that institutional identity serves as the starting point for building sustainable public trust. Earlier studies have primarily emphasized branding as a communication or marketing strategy aimed at increasing institutional visibility and attracting prospective students. In contrast, the present findings indicate that branding is most effective when the school's vision, graduate competencies, educational programs, and organizational culture consistently reflect the same institutional values [21], [22]. Such consistency enables stakeholders to experience the school's promised values directly, thereby strengthening institutional credibility and reducing the gap between the school's projected image and stakeholders' actual experiences. This finding reinforces the perspective that successful educational branding is grounded in authenticity rather than promotional intensity.

Another important finding concerns the role of strategic partnerships and achievement-based branding in strengthening institutional reputation. The results indicate that collaborations with government agencies, private organizations, community institutions, and international partners not only support educational activities but also enhance the school's legitimacy and visibility within the wider community. Similarly, students' and teachers' achievements function as objective evidence of educational quality, enabling prospective parents to evaluate school performance using observable indicators rather than promotional claims [23], [24]. These findings support the argument that institutional reputation is constructed through sustained organizational performance and stakeholder recognition. Therefore, achievements and partnerships should be viewed as strategic branding assets that enhance credibility and differentiate private schools in increasingly competitive educational environments.

The study also highlights the importance of service quality during the student admission process and the integration of multiple communication channels. The

admission process represents the first direct interaction between prospective parents and the school, making service responsiveness, transparency, professionalism, and accessibility critical determinants of initial trust [25], [26]. Moreover, the combination of digital communication, experiential marketing activities, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations creates a comprehensive communication ecosystem that strengthens stakeholder engagement. While digital platforms increase institutional visibility, direct experiences through school visits and community events allow prospective parents to validate the school's educational quality. Positive experiences subsequently encourage parents and alumni to share recommendations within their social networks, creating an organic branding process that is perceived as more credible than conventional advertising. This finding confirms that effective communication strategies in educational institutions should be supported by consistently delivering high-quality educational services [27], [28].

The concept of public trust in this study should therefore be understood as an interpretive construct derived from multiple sources of qualitative evidence rather than as a single quantitative measure. Public trust was inferred through the convergence of participants' accounts, observational findings, institutional documents, and student enrollment records. The consistency of these data sources enhanced the credibility of the interpretation through methodological triangulation. Although enrollment recovery provided supporting documentary evidence, it was not treated as a direct measure of public trust but as one indicator consistent with broader stakeholder perceptions. Future research could strengthen empirical validation by incorporating standardized parent satisfaction surveys, stakeholder perception instruments, institutional trust scales, and longitudinal quantitative analyses to examine changes in public trust over time.

From a theoretical perspective, this study proposes that public trust in private schools is generated through the interaction of multiple organizational dimensions rather than through isolated branding activities. The findings suggest an Integrated School Branding Model, in which institutional identity forms the foundation of branding, strategic partnerships and achievement-based branding strengthen institutional reputation, service excellence enhances stakeholder satisfaction, and integrated promotional communication broadens public awareness [9], [13]. These interconnected dimensions collectively foster public trust, which subsequently contributes to increased student enrollment and institutional sustainability. This conceptual model provides a broader understanding of educational branding by integrating perspectives from educational management, relationship marketing, and organizational reputation into a unified framework.

The findings further suggest that these five branding strategies do not contribute equally or independently to rebuilding public trust. Instead, they operate through a sequential and mutually reinforcing process. Strengthening institutional identity functions as the foundational driver by defining the school's distinctive values and educational vision. Strategic partnerships and achievement-based branding reinforce institutional legitimacy by providing credible evidence of educational quality. These organizational strengths are subsequently translated into positive stakeholder experiences through responsive admission services, while integrated promotional communication amplifies these experiences through digital platforms, experiential activities, and positive word-

of-mouth. Public trust therefore emerges from the cumulative interaction among these branding dimensions rather than from any individual strategy implemented in isolation.

It is important to note that the present study does not claim that the identified branding strategies were the sole cause of the observed increase in public trust and student enrollment. As a qualitative case study, the findings provide contextually grounded explanations based on the convergence of interview data, observations, institutional documents, and enrollment records. Other contextual factors—including demographic changes, school leadership, educational policy, curriculum development, tuition policies, and regional educational dynamics—may also have influenced institutional recovery. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as demonstrating the contribution of integrated branding within a broader organizational transformation rather than establishing direct causal relationships.

Practically, the findings offer important implications for school leaders and educational policymakers. Rather than allocating substantial resources solely to promotional campaigns, private schools should prioritize strengthening institutional identity, continuously improving educational quality, expanding strategic collaborations, fostering a culture of achievement, and delivering excellent services throughout all interactions with stakeholders. Such an integrated branding strategy is more likely to generate sustainable public trust, strengthen institutional competitiveness, and ensure the long-term viability of private educational institutions. Accordingly, school branding should be recognized as a comprehensive management strategy that aligns organizational values, educational practices, and stakeholder experiences to create lasting institutional reputation and public confidence.

The sustainability of school branding should not be evaluated solely by short-term increases in student enrollment. Instead, sustainable branding depends on the continuous alignment of institutional identity, educational quality, stakeholder relationships, service excellence, and strategic communication within the school's daily management practices. Because these dimensions represent ongoing organizational capabilities rather than temporary promotional activities, they provide a stronger foundation for maintaining public trust over time. Schools should therefore monitor branding performance through multiple longitudinal indicators, including stakeholder satisfaction, student enrollment trends, partnership continuity, academic and non-academic achievements, alumni engagement, and institutional reputation. Such continuous evaluation enables schools to identify emerging challenges and adapt their branding strategies to changing educational environments.

4 Conclusion

This study concludes that rebuilding public trust in private schools requires an integrated school branding strategy rather than relying solely on promotional activities. The case of SMPIT Istiqamah Balikpapan demonstrates that effective branding emerges through the synergy of five interrelated strategies: strengthening school identity, expanding strategic partnerships, promoting academic and non-academic achievements, improving student admission services (SPMB), and implementing integrated

promotional communication. Together, these strategies enhance institutional reputation, strengthen stakeholder engagement, and increase student enrollment.

The findings show that school identity provides the foundation for branding by aligning institutional vision, educational values, organizational culture, and learning experiences. Strategic partnerships enhance institutional legitimacy, achievement-based branding provides tangible evidence of educational quality, service excellence builds parental trust, and integrated communication—combining digital media, experiential marketing, and positive word-of-mouth—amplifies positive stakeholder experiences. These findings demonstrate that successful school branding is embedded in institutional management and educational practices rather than in marketing communication alone.

Theoretically, this study extends the educational branding literature by proposing the Integrated School Branding Model, which conceptualizes school branding as an organizational capability created through the interaction of institutional identity, educational quality, stakeholder relationships, service excellence, and strategic communication. Unlike previous studies that examined these dimensions separately, this model explains how they operate sequentially and reinforce one another to rebuild public trust and support long-term institutional sustainability.

Practically, the findings provide guidance for school leaders and policymakers in strengthening the competitiveness of private schools. School branding should be managed as a long-term strategic process integrating organizational identity, educational quality, partnership development, service excellence, and stakeholder communication.

This study is limited to a single qualitative case involving one Islamic private junior high school, with participants drawn primarily from internal stakeholders. Consequently, the findings offer analytical rather than statistical generalization and should be interpreted as a context-dependent conceptual framework. Future research should employ comparative multi-case or mixed-method designs involving diverse school contexts and external stakeholders, including parents, alumni, and community members, to validate and refine the proposed model across different educational settings.

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