

Implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM): Optimizing School Branding Strategy in Urban Islamic Schools

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ABSTRACT

Islam Terpadu Schools and *Islam Unggulan Schools* have emerged as alternative educational models combining Islamic and modern education. These institutions aim to strengthen religious foundations, build character, and enhance digital capabilities, addressing contemporary educational challenges. This qualitative study examines the school branding strategies of *Islam Terpadu* High School Al Fityan and *Islam High School* Al Amjad in Medan. Data collection methods included observations, interviews, and document analysis, involving key stakeholders such as school foundations, administrators, students, the community, and the JSIT (*Jaringan Sekolah Islam Terpadu*) network in North Sumatra. The analysis integrates Total Quality Management principles to contextualize branding efforts. Al Fityan High School employs the "Islam Terpadu" label to target upper-middle-class Muslim families, emphasizing extracurricular activities, character development, and a boarding school system. It differentiates itself through strategic use of social media for mass publication of school activities. Similarly, Al Amjad High School uses the "Islamic" label to position itself as a leading urban religious school. Its strategies include Quranic learning using the WAFA method, comprehensive teacher training, integrative learning, and guidance for college admissions. Both schools leverage brand image strategies to enhance their appeal and societal impact. These branding strategies contribute to increased community demand, positively influencing societal perceptions and graduate employability. Future research could explore the long-term effects of these strategies on student outcomes and community development. Effective branding strategies in Islamic education can enhance institutional reputation, community impact, and graduate success, positioning these schools as models for integrating religious and modern education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Guaranteed quality of educational services with the best teaching staff, supporting and complete facilities and infrastructure, mastery of foreign languages, and an 'equal' social environment for children, are some of the hopes of parents who are willing to pay for their children's education. (Ismael, 2022) However, this is not enough for urban Muslims to represent their identity through religious aspects and their learning patterns (Gazali, 2018). The development of Islamic educational institutions at that time seemed to be a bright spot that government authority was slowly no longer valid and was being replaced by a system of popular democracy. This includes developing and even building new Islamic educational institutions.

The rapid development of Integrated Islamic schools, especially in big cities, is proof that Integrated Islamic Schools are becoming a new trend in Islamic education in Indonesia (Sumanti, 2021). The world of education is also influenced by popular cultural trends but remains Islamic. Educational institutions also offer programs to provide the best service without compromising Islamic values. Quality education services can be proven, one of which is professional teachers, supportive and complete facilities and infrastructure (Suadi, 2022), mastery of foreign languages, supported by an 'equal' social environment for children, these are some of the hopes of parents who are willing to pay for their children's education. However, this is not enough for urban Muslims to represent their identity through religious aspects and their learning patterns.

Islamic School is an education that seeks to form a Muslim personality comprehensively, with a balanced education system of *akhlakiyah*, *fikriyah*, and *jasadiyah*. and supports science and religion side by side (Subhan, 2013). Leading Islamic schools provide special emphasis on science and technology and add an approach to religiosity and piety in every Islamic student subject (Nanang Zakaria, 2024). Not much different from Integrated Islamic Schools, Leading Islamic Schools also have the concept of integrating science and technology. Including an education concept that integrates the general curriculum with the Islamic curriculum. Currently, an independent curriculum adapted to Islamic values and additional character development programs is being implemented. While, the Leading Islamic School focuses more on achieving high academic achievement, apart from implementing an Islamic curriculum, this school also prepares students to excel in academic activities, independence, and national and international targets.

Sociological factors are increasingly becoming a very important consideration as to why in the last 15 years, it has received a warm welcome from urban communities in particular. Sociological reasons are in the form of position in social life or social status, which indirectly means that they want to be seen as different in terms of education (Lutfillah, 2022). Apart from that, it can increase a person's prestige in society (Perwita, 2023). The continuing improvement in the image of Integrated Islamic Schools and Leading Islamic Schools in the eyes of society is one of the factors why parents generally choose Islamic schools for their sons and daughters. Indirectly sending children to Integrated Islamic Schools and Leading Islamic Schools is automatically part of the upper middle class of Muslims.

Islam Terpadu Schools and *Islam Unggulan* Schools have emerged and developed to this day as alternative solutions for studying Islam among urban Muslims. The combination of Islamic education and modern education implemented in these two Islamic labeled schools is able to respond to current developments with a strong foundation of religious knowledge, character development as a basis for moral formation, and strengthening digital mastery abilities. The combination of general subjects and religious subjects is a distinctive feature in the curriculum structure of *Islam Terpadu* Schools and *Islam Unggulan* Schools.

Islam Terpadu School has a *Terpadu* curriculum, a curriculum that does not separate the two into religious subjects that are 'mandatory' to study. Furthermore, this scientific group is equally important because they both study verses of the Al-Quran. One group of science studies the verses of Allah written in the text of the Al-Quran and Hadis, and another group of science studies the verses of Allah in the context of the life of the universe (JSIT, 2013). Likewise, the leading Islamic schools have a curriculum that combines science and technology and an Islamic learning climate.

The development of Integrated Islamic Schools and Islamic Schools is very large in Indonesia (Abidin, 2022), either through organizational networks or independently (nationally), all schools and madrasas are able to exchange management concepts so that the vision and mission of JSIT can be realized optimally. For this reason, this research will reveal how to create and strengthen school branding 'products' of Integrated Islamic Schools and Leading Islamic Schools through implementing real curriculum and hidden curriculum activities as well as superior extracurricular activities in each school. The presence of the Integrated Islamic School seems to indicate a shift in the learning patterns of urban Muslims, as evidenced by the nuances of educational capitalism which are clearly visible with the large amount of money that must be spent to be able to register and take part in learning at this school, with the offering of a learning system including an integrated curriculum, luxurious buildings, and The services provided and adequate facilities seem to explain that quality education must be expensive. This confirms that Integrated Islamic Schools are in great demand among elite Muslims both economically, educationally and bureaucratically.

The label "Islam" is increasingly attached to schools that are not affiliated with the Kementerian Agama. This is also one of the sub-implementations of marketing management, namely positioning-differentiation (Mukhtar, 2017); This is what differentiates other schools from schools that use the Islamic label, such as Islamic School, Islamic Boarding School, Integrated Islam, and so on (Fitriani, 2022). Apart from being seen from the name, the attachment of the religious label is also strengthened by the activities carried out at the school such as Tahfiz classes, Al-Quran reading methods, extracurricular activities, integrated services, and even communication with parents/guardians of students at the Islamic School.

Strengthening academic and non-academic activities through extracurricular programs and additional activities carried out by schools can create their own brand (Junaidi, 2023). For example, 8 (eight) activity units are combined into an acronym "AKAL" (Al-Qur'an, Karakter, Akademik, Leadership) + BAKAT (strengthening independence in preparation for becoming a student). Religious values through teachers are also integrated in the learning process, this supports the motto of Integrated Islam, namely, "a teacher of any subject is a religious teacher" (Wahyuni, 2022).

The Integrated Islam label is strengthened by religious activities and those that are integrated with science (Ratnasari, 2020), which of course becomes its own branding for people who are included in the rational customer community group who choose educational institutions based on track records or the advantages of graduates and quality learning processes that are able to compete with the market. global. However, quite a few people who are classified as emotional customers choose Integrated Islam because of considerations of religiosity (as long as it contains a lot of religious lessons), without even considering how much it costs. The branding built by Al Fityan has reached the community and has become a distinct advantage for SMA IT Al Fityan Medan. TQM focuses on continuous improvement and high quality standards in all services. With this consistency, schools can improve their reputation in the eyes of the community. With consistent TQM, schools can build special values or characteristics that differentiate them from other schools, such as superior educational services, an Islamic values-based learning approach, and full support for student character development.

Al Amjad Islamic High School Medan, under the Haji Hasballah Yunus Foundation, was established as a prominent Islamic school without affiliation to any specific Islamic organization. Its strong economic support has enabled the school to progress rapidly, particularly in providing infrastructure and learning facilities. Additionally, innovations in Quranic learning have become a distinctive advantage for the school. Al Amjad Islamic High School employs the WAFA method as a comprehensive approach to Quranic education. The Wafa method is an innovative approach to learning the Qur'an that maximizes a comprehensive, easy, and enjoyable right-brain approach. Its learning process applies the 5P method (Opening, Experience, Teaching, Assessment, and Closing) and incorporates the Hijaz tone (Singgarani, 2021).

Memorizing the Qur'an is not an easy process. It requires a strong determination, the presence of a mentor, and the selection of an appropriate method. The right method plays a crucial role in influencing the final outcome of memorizing its verses (Liqfa Nurul Fadhila, 2022). Through the Daar Al-Qur'an

program, all teachers are required to understand and learn the WAFA method for Quranic teaching in classrooms across all levels, (Widari, 2024) from kindergarten, elementary, and middle school to high school. Additionally, non-academic activities have become a routine at Al Amjad Islamic High School, such as training mosque imams, khatibs, public speaking, and Quran memorization.

The existence of this program strengthens the public's perception that Al-Amjad Islamic High School is genuinely committed to nurturing a Qur'anic generation (Nurkhalizah, 2024). In addition to the WAFA method, the school is also dedicated to shaping students' character, innovating in Qur'anic learning, and developing extracurricular activities that are oriented toward Islamic values. One example of this commitment is the implementation of the "greeting and salutation" character practice. Character education is an anthropological structure inherent in every individual, (Nurojiyah, 2024) where character is not merely about actions but also the result of a process. (Destian, 2021) Therefore, each individual is expected to take responsibility for their actions. Carefully planned by involving parents and firmly guided by the vision and mission, it is well-organized, implemented dynamically, strictly monitored and supervised by appointed officials, and comprehensively evaluated through personalized methods, mentoring, and spiritual retreats or training sessions. (Fahmi, 2022)

The study of integrated quality management in optimizing school branding strategies is essential, particularly for urban Islamic schools like SMA IT Al Fityan and SMA Islam Al Amjad, which face increasing competition. With the proliferation of Islamic schools offering superior programs and modern facilities, implementing Total Quality Management (TQM) becomes critical for these schools to enhance the quality of their educational services and strengthen their public image and reputation.

Observations at SMA IT Al Fityan and SMA Islam Al Amjad revealed two core systems in their development strategies: (1) academic activities centered on classroom learning and (2) non-academic activities focused on self-development through extracurricular programs. Effective management of these activities using TQM principles is pivotal in building strong brand awareness within the Islamic school community. This need to understand how TQM can bolster school branding has inspired the current research, which explores the practical application of TQM theories to create competitive and reputable Islamic schools in Medan.

2. METHODS

This research aims to describe the strategies of Islamic schools in improving the quality of education. This includes emphasizing the labels used by schools that the development of Islamic education is now growing very rapidly. The research approach used in this research is qualitative which describes real phenomena in detail. These phenomena include forms, activities, characteristics, changes, similarities and differences between one another (Sugiyono, 2008). Furthermore, the type of research used is a multisite study; "is a qualitative research approach that we designed to gain an in-depth knowledge of an organizational phenomenon that had barely been research strategic scanning" (Bungin, 2003).

The sites or locations used as research locations are SMA IT Al Fityan and Al Amjad Islamic High School, both of which are located in the Medan. The presence of the researcher is very important in the research process, for this reason the researcher must know information about the strategies used by the two school leaders. This research is limited to only looking at the planning and implementation of school branding strategies at these 2 (two) urban Islamic school sites. The data collected is in the form of opinions/perceptions from policy stakeholders including foundations, school principals, deputy principals, teachers, students and the head of the *North Sumatra Region Integrated Islamic School Network* (JSIT).

Data collection techniques use participant observation, in-depth interviews and documentation methods (Surakhmad, 1990). Observations carried out by researchers deliberately and systematically are in accordance with the analysis of social phenomena (Kartini, 1990). Observations were made regarding the form of activities/communication of the principal towards deputies, teachers and other

structural members. Learning process, extracurricular activities, OSIS activities, and PPDB activities. Furthermore, interviews were addressed to the Foundation, school principals, representatives, teachers, students, the community, and the chairman of JSIT North Sumatra. Then the work programs of school principals, teachers, OSIS, extracurricular coaches, brochures and social media became important documentation in this research.

The data analysis method used is descriptive qualitative. This analysis aims to reveal research results related to the School Branding Strategy of Islamic schools in Medan City. The data analysis process is carried out simultaneously with data collection through several stages including data collection, reduction, presentation and data verifical (Hubermen, 1992). At the conclusion/verification stage, what is obtained can also be new findings that have not existed before (Hubermen, 1992). Make conclusions (verification) by looking back at data reduction and data display, so that the conclusions do not deviate from the data being analyzed.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 *Planning and Implementing School Branding Strategy*

3.1.1 SMA IT Al Fityan Medan

The initial findings from the observation stage reveal that the school branding strategy at SMA IT Al Fityan Medan is systematically planned based on the core tasks and functions outlined in job descriptions. The school has a cohesive team that aligns program development with its vision, mission, and objectives (Ginting, 2023). In developing its branding strategy, SMA IT Al Fityan applies management function theories, particularly in planning. This process involves collaboration among key stakeholders, including the foundation's top leadership, school administrators, homeroom teachers, and subject teachers, all of whom contribute to designing and shaping the school's development initiatives. Strategic planning at SMA IT Al Fityan begins with the principal coordinating efforts with the deputy principal, followed by providing guidance and engaging in discussions with teachers and school operator staff to ensure alignment and effective implementation of the branding strategy. The planning steps used by SMA IT Al Fityan Medan are as follows:

1) Environmental Analysis (SWOT Analysis)

One indicator that a school has high competitiveness is by looking at the level of public trust seen when accepting new students (Levin, 2002). one of the characteristics of a good quality school is that many parents are interested in it, so many people will enroll their children in that school. At the implementation stage of the school branding strategy at SMA IT Al Fityan Medan using SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). SWOT analysis is based on the logic that the success of a business or organization is determined by the internal and external conditions of the company/organization. The following is an explanation of the SWOT analysis used as a starting point for planning school branding strategies at SMA Al Fityan Medan, as follows:

Table 1. SWOT Analysis of School Branding Strategies

Strenght	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The spirit of a teacher who works as a team b. Registration fees and tuition fees are still in the affordable category c. Qualified principal management d. The maximum services provided by the school are also supported by the teachers e. The label <i>Akal Bakat</i> 'intelligence+talent' is a strength in itself for schools.
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Weakness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. In terms of location, it is less strategic b. Dormitories that cannot be used effectively. c. Join the JSIT, but it is not yet running systematically. d. Adaptation to the independent curriculum.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Collaborative relationships with alumni will help maintain the quality of the school. b. A supportive school environment starting from elementary, middle and high school. c. Private schools are prone to excessively limited registration times. d. Bonds with alumni that have been formed over time.
Treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Public trust began to develop, and other SITs were developed. b. The social background of the community requires stability for candidates who will enter this school. c. <i>Brand</i> on social media are starting to be completed by 'newcomers'

The table describes a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) of a school. In terms of strengths, the school benefits from a solid team of teachers, affordable tuition fees, qualified principal management, excellent services supported by teachers, and a unique identity through the "Akal Bakat" (Intelligence + Talent) label. However, there are weaknesses, including a less strategic location, dormitories that are not used effectively, the membership in JSIT not being systematically implemented, and challenges in adapting to the independent curriculum. Regarding opportunities, collaborative relationships with alumni, a supportive school environment across all levels, and the limited registration periods of other private schools offer potential for quality enhancement. On the other hand, threats include increasing public trust in other SIT schools, the community's demand for stability among prospective students, and competition in social media branding from emerging schools. This analysis provides a comprehensive overview to help design better strategies for school development.

2) Strategy Formulation

Formulating a vision and mission in educational organizations is a fundamental process that defines their direction and purpose. A vision encapsulates the organization's future aspirations, achieved through the structured implementation of its mission (Ginting, 2023). At SMA IT Al Fityan Medan, the vision and mission are developed through a thorough process of monitoring and evaluation conducted by a dedicated development team. This process considers key components such as adherence to founding values, alignment with organizational goals, incorporation of input from the development team, and forward-thinking to anticipate future needs.

The resulting vision, mission, and objectives for SMA IT Al Fityan Medan are as follows: The school's vision is to "Build a generation of believers who master science and are able to face the challenges of the times." This vision reflects a commitment to fostering both faith and academic excellence among students. The mission focuses on preparing a conducive and integrated educational environment for students, supported by superior education management and competent teaching staff, all aligned with quality education standards to achieve human development goals.

The objectives emphasize equipping students with knowledge, skills, and positive mindsets; fostering balanced and integrated personal development; building an education system that enhances student achievement; and preparing students for the workforce. Additional objectives include improving curriculum implementation, strengthening Arabic language learning, deepening connections with Islamic history and culture, and fostering community partnerships to advance

educational development (www.alfityanmedan.sch.id, 2023). This comprehensive approach ensures that SMA IT Al Fityan Medan remains committed to its foundational values while evolving to meet contemporary educational demands.

3) Development of follow-up plans

After the vision, mission, and goals of SMA IT Al Fityan Medan were carefully formulated through discussions with experts and the school quality development team, their effective implementation became essential. The school developed a structured follow-up plan to translate these guiding principles into actionable outcomes. This process involved several key steps to ensure alignment with the school's objectives and continual quality improvement.

First, the school prioritized organizing by delegating development tasks to individuals whose responsibilities matched their educational background and expertise. This strategic allocation of resources helped streamline the execution of plans. Next, identifying priorities was critical; the school mapped out key development areas to focus on urgent improvements with the greatest potential to enhance educational quality. In addition, effective communication was emphasized by fostering collaboration among all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, staff, and the surrounding community. Lastly, evaluation and adjustment were integral to the process. Regular monitoring and evaluation (monev) practices ensured that progress was tracked effectively and adjustments were made to maintain momentum toward achieving goals (Ginting, 2023).

The follow-up plan has been implemented gradually since 2007 and remains a work in progress. This iterative process has significantly contributed to the school's branding efforts, establishing SMA IT Al Fityan Medan as a reputable Islamic institution. School branding involves assigning unique values to the institution, including the recognition of its Islamic identity. The development team continues to monitor and evaluate activities systematically, ranging from academic programs to extracurricular initiatives. Each activity is coordinated under a specific leader who ensures that standards are maintained and objectives are met, reinforcing the culture of continuous improvement (Sugianto, 2023).

The inclusion of structured extracurricular programs further exemplifies the school's commitment to holistic development. Coordinators not only oversee activities but also contribute to the monitoring and evaluation team, ensuring every program aligns with the broader vision of the school. This ongoing cycle of monev, which includes direct observation of both academic and non-academic activities, reinforces the school's ability to adapt, innovate, and uphold its branding as a center of Islamic education excellence.

3.1.2 SMA Islam Al Amjad Medan

As one of the competitors in marketing Islamic education services in the suburbs of Medan, SMA Islam Al Amjad able to convince the public with the label of a licensed Al-Quran reading method by an official institution. This can be a label for Islamic schools, which consist of kindergarten, elementary school, middle school and high school, which use the same reading method. Focus on learning the Qur'an, making the principal as a leader at the high school level develop how the Qur'an can be present in society. Every Friday there are several student representatives who carry out social activities, with the term "Friday Blessings" they go out into the community by distributing breakfast and attending a series of Friday services at the nearest mosque.. (Lubis, 2023) Matters relating to the development of the Al Amjad Islamic High School brand can be seen from the implementation of planning as follows:

1) School Label Analysis

During the field observation period, it was initially observed that Al Amjad Islamic High School focused its branding efforts primarily on facilities and services. However, a deeper investigation

revealed that the school also incorporates a licensed Al-Qur'an reading method, the WAFA method, into its curriculum. This method, while not explicitly labeled as part of the school's brand by its leadership, has become widely recognized among the public for its distinctive approach to Al-Qur'an learning (Lubis, 2023). Over time, the school has actively worked to strengthen its label by engaging experts and leveraging its public relations team to emphasize the importance of a strong brand identity. These efforts have been instrumental in fostering a positive image within the community.

The process of understanding and reinforcing the school's identity includes a thorough review of its vision, mission, and goals, which highlight the distinctive features of Al Amjad Islamic High School. The WAFA Al-Qur'an learning method stands out as a holistic and comprehensive right-brain approach to learning the Al-Qur'an. This innovative method integrates multiple dimensions of learning through its 5T framework: Tilawah (recitation), Tahfidz (memorization), Tarjamah (translation), Tafhim (understanding), and Tafsir (interpretation). Often referred to as a right-brain method, it utilizes multisensory techniques, combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements to engage students. This multisensory approach makes learning the Al-Qur'an more effective, enjoyable, and conducive to long-term retention (WAFA, 2013).

By incorporating the WAFA method, Al Amjad Islamic High School has created a unique and appealing learning experience that resonates with its community. This innovative branding strategy not only reinforces the school's identity but also ensures its competitive edge in providing comprehensive Islamic education.

2) Determining And Developing Branding Messages

After conducting an environmental analysis, the label as an Islamic school must emerge either intentionally or in the planning process. Indeed, currently labels/brands in society appear naturally, but we design them in such a way so that the method of reading the Qur'an is known to the public (Ciptadi, 2023). This brand development was also carried out by sending teachers to Surabaya as a learning center using the WAFA method. Then, It will take part in the training and get a 'diploma' of graduation, be worthy of a mastery proficiency rating, and be able to teach students and become mentors to teachers at school. In addition, teamwork requires support, such as mutual trust, understanding, openness, honesty, courage, effective communication, and interdependence among its members.

3) Visual Identity

The importance of identity in a school brand lies in its ability to create a strong visual presence, often referred to as visual branding. Al Amjad Islamic High School leverages Instagram as a key platform for showcasing its visual identity to the public online. Through its @smaalamjad account, the school creates engaging content that has become a visual trend, attracting attention and interest. This includes a variety of posts such as photos, curated feeds, and videos, some of which link to additional content on YouTube.

The visual identity strategy employed by the school is rooted in the concept of continuous improvement, ensuring that its online presence evolves to remain appealing and relevant. By consistently maintaining and enhancing its social media branding, Al Amjad Islamic High School successfully strengthens its connection with the community while reinforcing its identity as a modern and dynamic educational institution. The @smaalamjad account exemplifies how thoughtful and strategic use of visual branding can enhance public engagement and build a recognizable school brand.

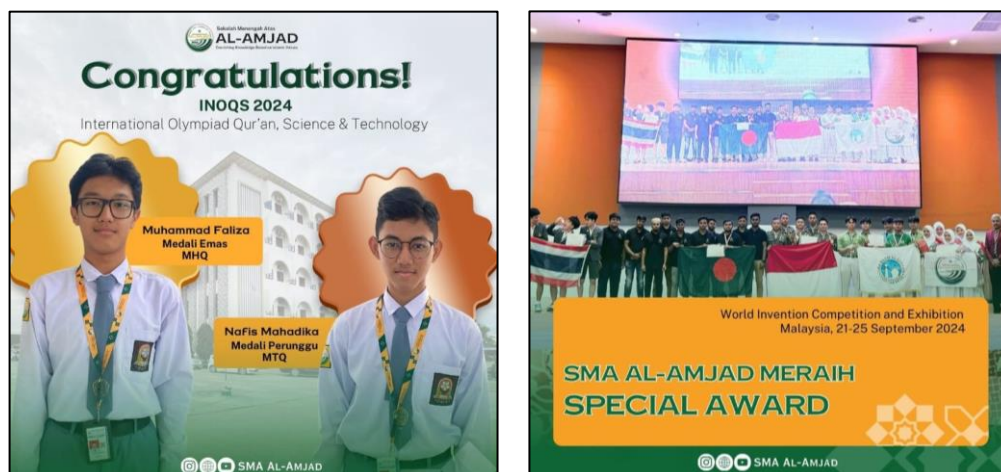


Figure 1. Visual Branding

The strategic use of Instagram visuals is a highly effective tool for building and strengthening school branding. Engaging, consistent, and relevant content can enhance the school's appeal, build public trust, and reinforce its image as a leading educational institution. This statement supports the findings of the research about the social media performance of schools while the respondents are strongly satisfied with the services provided by schools through their respective social media accounts (Areola, 2023).

In this digital era, Instagram must be properly utilized as a long-term information medium, as it serves as a vital asset in the school's marketing and branding strategy. (Joanna Krywalski Santiago, 2020) The evolution of the digital age and the rise of social networking sites brought changes to the consumer behavior. This transformation has led to an increasing number of opportunities and challenges. Both practitioners and academics have acknowledged the increasing importance of digital influencers. However, due to its contemporaneity, the academic literature regarding this subject faces some limitations.

4) Communication Strategy

Al Amjad Islamic High School employs a comprehensive marketing communication strategy that combines the use of social media with direct community engagement. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, play a central role in promoting the school's activities and values, creating a dynamic visual identity that attracts public attention. Beyond digital outreach, the school actively engages with the surrounding community and local mosques through organized service initiatives, particularly during significant occasions such as educational celebrations and Islamic holidays (Lubis, 2023). These initiatives include activities like donations for orphans, Ramadan sharing programs, and Friday prayer events, reflecting the school's commitment to social responsibility and Islamic principles. This dual approach not only reinforces the school's branding as a socially aware and spiritually grounded institution but also builds trust and strengthens its reputation among prospective students and their families (Firdausi, 2023).

A key aspect of the school's success lies in building effective internal teamwork and leveraging external networks, including parents, alumni, and the broader community. Research highlights the critical role of teamwork in educational institutions, emphasizing the importance of mutual trust and confidence among members as foundational elements (Fridiyanto, 2021). Effective teamwork is further supported by components such as mutual understanding, openness, honesty, courage, effective communication, and interdependence (Tuckman, 2001). These qualities create a collaborative environment that enhances internal cohesion and strengthens relationships with external stakeholders.

By fostering teamwork and community partnerships, Al Amjad Islamic High School expands its influence and solidifies its position as a leading institution in Islamic education.

Discussion

At SMA IT Al Fityan Medan, the branding strategy is systematically planned and implemented using management principles. The school relies on a cohesive team of stakeholders, including foundation leaders, administrators, and teachers, to design and execute its development initiatives (Ginting, 2023). The planning process incorporates a comprehensive SWOT analysis to assess the school's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This analysis helps the school identify competitive advantages, such as its "Akal Bakat" label and affordable tuition fees, while addressing challenges like its less strategic location and dormitory use. Such strategic planning aligns with the management theory emphasizing environmental analysis for organizational success (Levin, 2002). The continuous refinement of strategies through collaboration among stakeholders ensures the school remains competitive and responsive to community needs.

The school's vision and mission further guide its branding strategy. The vision, "Building a generation of believers who master science and are able to face the challenges of the times," reflects a commitment to integrating faith and academic excellence. The mission emphasizes creating a conducive learning environment supported by superior education management and competent teaching staff. These guiding principles are operationalized through structured follow-up plans, focusing on organizing resources, identifying priorities, fostering collaboration, and continuous monitoring and evaluation (Sugianto, 2023). This systematic approach establishes SMA IT Al Fityan as a reputable institution that integrates religious and modern education effectively.

SMA Islam Al Amjad Medan adopts a distinct branding strategy focused on Quranic education and community engagement. The school emphasizes the WAFA method, a licensed and innovative approach to Quranic learning that integrates multisensory techniques for effective student engagement. By branding itself with this unique method, the school has established a strong identity that resonates with the community (Lubis, 2023). Moreover, the institution enhances its branding through initiatives like Friday Blessings, which involve students in community service, fostering a positive relationship with the surrounding society. These efforts align with research on branding that highlights the importance of incorporating unique values and social responsibility into an institution's identity (Ciptadi, 2023).

SMA Islam Al Amjad utilizes a dual communication strategy combining digital marketing through Instagram and direct community engagement. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, serve as dynamic tools for showcasing the school's activities, creating a compelling visual identity, and attracting public attention. Engaging content, such as curated posts and videos, enhances the school's online presence and fosters trust among stakeholders (Areola, 2023). This visual branding strategy aligns with findings that emphasize the transformative role of social media in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors in education (Santiago, 2020).

In addition to digital efforts, the school's active participation in community service during Islamic holidays and educational celebrations reinforces its branding as a socially responsible and spiritually grounded institution (Firdausi, 2023). Collaborative activities, including donations and Quranic learning workshops, highlight the school's commitment to Islamic principles and community development. These initiatives exemplify how schools can leverage both digital and interpersonal communication strategies to enhance their reputation and build meaningful relationships with stakeholders.

Effective teamwork is critical in implementing and sustaining branding strategies. SMA IT Al Fityan and SMA Islam Al Amjad both emphasize internal collaboration and external networking to strengthen their influence. Research underscores the importance of mutual trust, openness, and interdependence among team members in achieving organizational success (Tuckman, 2001). These qualities enable the schools to maintain cohesion while engaging parents, alumni, and the broader

community in their branding efforts. By fostering collaborative environments, these institutions enhance their branding impact and position themselves as leaders in Islamic education (Fridiyanto, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

This research highlights that educational institutions, particularly Elite Islamic Schools, are valuable assets in today's globalized and technology-driven era. The emergence of Elite Islamic Schools on the outskirts of Medan presents a competitive challenge to Islamic boarding schools and madrasas, urging these institutions to adapt to evolving community expectations. Observations and interviews reveal that the Muslim community prioritizes quality service and is willing to invest in education that balances academic excellence with superior facilities and infrastructure. At SMA IT Al Fityan Medan, school branding begins with a comprehensive SWOT analysis to align strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats with strategic goals. Key strategies include formulating plans, implementing follow-ups, and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation. The school's branding is encapsulated in the "Intellect and Talent" label, emphasizing Quranic studies, character building, leadership, and talent development. Meanwhile, SMA Islam Al Amjad Medan focuses on innovative Quranic learning through the WAFA method, supported by certified and competent educators, while leveraging a strong visual identity on social media to engage the community and reinforce its brand.

The research underscores the significance of integrating innovative teaching methods, consistent social media branding, and strategic communication in enhancing the reputation of Islamic educational institutions. However, the study is limited to two schools and does not explore broader regional or global trends in Islamic education branding. Future research could expand the scope to include a comparative analysis of branding strategies in diverse educational contexts or investigate the long-term impact of digital identity on student enrollment and community engagement.

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