Innovation of Brand Building and Character Development in Islamic School: A Transformation Based on School Core Values

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes the innovation process of Islamic schools in building students' image and character. This research was conducted at the primary education level, specifically at a private junior high school in the suburbs. The school has proven successful in building its image and character education model, transforming it from a public school into a leading school chosen by parents. Furthermore, this school was selected based on several other factors, including its unique history and its position as a leading and exemplary Islamic school in Malang, Indonesia. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, with data collection conducted through interviews, observations, and documentation. In the data analysis process, the researcher used case study data analysis, as described by Yin, which consists of four parts: pattern matching, explanation building, time series analysis, and repeated observations. The study's results revealed that the school was initially an underappreciated Islamic school with lower parental school preferences. The school did not offer any specialisations or achievements to prospective students. After the school innovated by initiating and articulating its core values in various aspects of the school, including the curriculum, environment, and social media, the school's core values became a driving force in developing character education and enhancing the school's brand. This condition attracts public attention and increases parental preference for schools. This study suggests that initiating and articulating unique and strong core values is a breakthrough that can transform the brand and character education model of schools, ultimately increasing parental preference for these institutions. This study recommends further quantitative research to measure the specific impact of implementing core values on parental preferences in a more measurable manner.

Keywords: *Islamic school, School brand, Character education, Transformation, School core values*

INTRODUCTION

In modern Islamic education, the core values of schools play a crucial role in shaping the identity of the institution and building a sustainable educational culture (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). These values not only serve as normative guidelines in teacher-student interactions and managerial decision-making (Day et al., 2020; Lindsey et al., 2018), but also foster a sense of belonging and attachment to the institution (Allen et al., 2018; Pendergast et al., 2018). Moreover, the core values of schools play a role in instilling moral character for school citizens (Fitranita et

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al., 2023). In today's digital era, reaffirming these values is increasingly important in creating an inclusive learning environment, where diversity is respected and learners feel supported in their academic and personal development (Brown, 2019; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Core values not only shape students' learning experiences but also prepare them to face complex social challenges in everyday life. Therefore, the strategy of managing core values in schools is an urgent issue to be studied further.

Although there have been studies discussing the role of school core values in character education (Pradana et al., 2020; Watts, 2021), research linking core values to school branding strategies is still limited. Most of the existing literature focuses more on the implementation of core values in learning practices and student character formation (Baderiah & Munawir, 2024; Deal & Peterson, 2016). However, how these values can be used as an effective branding strategy to increase school competitiveness and attract parents' interest has not been widely discussed. Several studies have highlighted the importance of character education in parents' preferences in choosing schools for their children (Curren, 2017; Singh, 2019), but none have examined how school branding transformation based on core values can influence these preferences. In addition, previous studies have focused more on the internal aspects of character education without exploring its long-term impact on the reputation and competitiveness of schools in the education industry. This study offers a new perspective by examining the relationship between Islamic school branding transformation, character education, and parental preferences in the context of suburban schools in the digital era.

The main objective of this study is to describe how the process of initiation and articulation of core values in suburban Islamic schools can be used as an effective branding strategy in increasing parental preferences. The focus of this study is on Islamic schools located in the suburban areas of Malang, which have undergone significant transformation from their initial underdeveloped condition to excellent schools with strong branding. This study aims to fill the gap in previous studies by offering a holistic approach that connects the managerial dimensions of Islamic education, branding strategies, and character education in one comprehensive analytical framework. Thus, this study not only provides theoretical insights into branding in Islamic education, but also provides practical guidance that can be applied by other schools seeking to enhance their attractiveness and competitiveness through the implementation of well-articulated core values.

The main argument tested in this study is that the core values applied in Islamic schools are not only the basis for the formation of student character, but can also function as a strategic instrument in building a strong school image. In this context, these values play an important role in strengthening the position of the school in the eyes of parents and the community. This study tests the hypothesis that the success of a school in attracting parents' interest does not only depend on physical facilities or academic achievements alone, but more on how schools can package their core values consistently in a branding strategy that is integrated with the educational activities and services they offer. Therefore, branding transformation based on core values can be a key factor in attracting parents' attention and changing their perceptions of the quality of education provided by the school.

This study seeks to examine the relationship between school branding transformation based on core values and parental preferences, and its impact on school competitiveness in the digital era. By mapping this process, this study aims to make a significant contribution to the development of a more adaptive and relevant Islamic education management strategy. In addition, this study will also provide a deeper understanding of how digital technology and social media can be used as a tool in communicating school branding based on religious character and Islamic values. The results of this study are expected to provide practical recommendations that are not only relevant to Islamic schools in suburban areas, but can also be applied in a broader context, especially in designing sustainable and effective branding strategies in the digital era.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore and understand in depth the transformation that has occurred in Islamic schools in terms of branding strategies and character formation that focuses on increasing parental preferences in the digital era. The qualitative approach was chosen because of its ability to explore the views, perceptions, and subjective experiences of various stakeholders, including principals, teachers, parents, and students (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2016). In this context, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how internal and external factors influence parents' choice of Islamic schools in the digital era, which are not only related to academic aspects but also the character values instilled by the school.

Case studies were chosen as the research design because they allow researchers to examine phenomena holistically in a particular context (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2016), namely Islamic schools that implement branding strategies and religious character in the digital era. The study was conducted in three Islamic schools selected based on certain criteria, such as school reputation, success in implementing branding strategies, and strengthening religious character recognized by the surrounding community. The research locations consisted of two Islamic schools in urban areas and one Islamic school in a suburban area that have different characteristics in terms of resources and technological influence. Data collection techniques were carried out through three main techniques:

Interview: conducted in a semi-structured manner with open-ended questions to be more flexible in collecting data. Researchers scheduled interview sessions outside school hours and in special meetings so as not to interfere with school activities. Key informants included the principal, religious subject teachers, general subject teachers, students and parents of students. Each interview session was documented in the form of field notes to be analyzed thematically. The focus of data collection included informants' understanding of school branding strategies, the processes and values underlying student character formation, school motivation in developing core values, teacher and parent involvement in strengthening values, and perceptions of changes in school image over time.

Observation: researchers were involved in school activities to directly observe the implementation of the school's core values in forming student character. Observations were conducted on learning activities (intracurricular) both in religious subjects and general subjects, co-curricular activities, extracurricular activities, interactions between teachers and students, students' daily behavior and overall school culture, use of symbols in the school environment, visual narratives, and strategic school programs in strengthening branding and character education. The results of the observations were recorded in a field journal and analyzed to understand the manifestation of core values in real terms in the school environment.

Documentation: researchers collected and analyzed various relevant official and non-official documents, including the school's vision and mission, curriculum documents, lesson plans that integrate core values, internal policy documents, promotional materials (such as brochures, pamphlets, social media posts), and activity documentation (photos, activity reports, and meeting agendas with parents). Researchers analyzed how the core values were articulated in these documents and their consistency with practices in the field.

In the data analysis process, the researcher used case study data analysis according to Yin (2011) which consists of four part patterns including pattern matching, explanation building, time series analysis, and repeated observations. Meanwhile, to ensure the validity of the research results, the researcher used triangulation which includes method triangulation (comparing data from various methods such as interviews, observations, and documentation), source triangulation (comparing data from various informants such as principals, teachers, and parents), and theory triangulation. Thus, triangulation helps ensure that the findings produced are valid and reliable.

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Result
Core Values Initiated by School: Religiosity, Hard-Work, and Honesty

The present study carried out interviews with several school stakeholders including school principal, vice of school principal in curriculum, and teachers to gather the information regarding the initiation stage of predetermining school's core values. This study also depicted the results of FGD to compliment the interview data, thus, the findings of the initiation process could be well narrated. Based on the interview and FGD results, there were three core values initiated by the school namely religiosity, honesty, and hard-work. Figure 1 shows the rationale of initiating the three core values as the results of initiation stage.
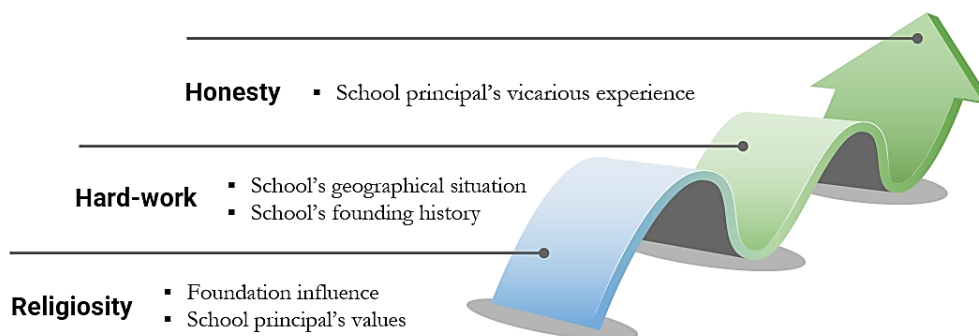
Figure 1. Results of the Initiation Stage

Figure 1 shows that there were three values initiated by the school as its core values namely religiosity, hard-work, and honesty. First, religiosity was initiated by the school's founding shareholders including the participation of its foundation that was in-charge in building the school along with becoming its financial and administrative supports. The respectable foundation was Nahdhlatul Ulama (NU), one of the biggest organizations in Islamic teaching legally acknowledged by Indonesian government. This pertinent and significant rationale of determining religiosity as the first school's core value was supported by several interview script snippets and FGD notes.

> "...I am the oldest teacher here and become the living proof how this school is built under NU foundation. There has been a long time that there is no Islamic elementary school here. Then, NU built the school with the intention of providing basic education based on Islamic values for those in needs." (SP-snippet1)

The above interview snippet shows that the school was built because the surrounding society did not have options for sending their children to Islamic-based elementary school. The absenteeism of such typical school might be due to the limited government's care and supervision over the suburban areas, like where the school was located. The geographical location and the discontented society's demand enforced NU as the school foundation to build NU-based elementary school there. SP said that this school was to fulfill the society's demand where they wanted their children to be educated relevantly to Islamic values. Since there had been a long time of waiting for this model of school, SP completely implied that he felt captivated with the society's enthusiasm toward the existing school. Moreover, he was psychologically sure that the information of this school's founding history was accountable since he inferred himself as the living proof where NU foundation came and realized the aforementioned demand. What SP stated about the first core value named religiosity coming from the Islamic value of the NU foundation was supported by one of senior teachers in the school (TE1).

> "...NU-based elementary school students must put the mastery of Islamic religion first. Beside it is because of NU foundation's value, our school principal is also very religious. He prays very discipline and likes to do and attend da'wah. He encourages others to do so." (TE1-snippet1)

TE1 confidently agreed that the core value religiosity must be prioritized due to the values owned by NU foundation and the value that had been demanded by society for a long time. She definitely confirmed that the teaching of Islamic religion must dominate the school activities, however, she did not elaborate why this value must be put over the others like scientific knowledge or communication skills. In addition, TE1 reasoned that the core value named religiosity was not only influenced by NU foundation's values, but also the religious density owned by the school principal. She, and possibly recognized by other teachers and school stakeholders, believed that the SP's characters must influence the rising religiosity value. She described SP as the one who was discipline in undertaking the obligatory five prays a day, exposing himself in several *da'wah* activities, and support other school stakeholders to do the same thing. It could be implied that SP's religiousness was dominant and became a role model with good Islamic-perceived values, of which the school members could follow his example. Therefore, religiosity was initiated as the major core value in the school.

The second core value obtained from the interviews was hard-work, a state where every school member must show their sense of institutional belonging in a form of observable efforts in accelerating both individual and school qualities. There were two rationales behind the decision of initiating the second core values: school's founding history and its geographical location. First, school's founding history was associated to the spirit of surrounding society that supported NU foundation to realize their education demands.

> "...I admit that the strong willingness of the people here gives us an inspiration. Some of their representatives frequently contact the local government to realize their wills. They get too many difficulties but they still put extra valuable efforts. This action must be emulated by their children. When you have dreams, you must work hard." (SP-snippet2)

As one of the founding members and the chosen school leader by NU foundation, SP implied that he needed to include the value conveyed by the surrounding people namely hard-work. He was amazed by the firm spirit in realizing Islamic-based elementary school for their children. He conveyed that the precious hard-work of the people did not stop even there were obstacles in, for instance, administration and finance. This unstoppable belief and hard-work inspired him to put core value hard-work as a local spirit that must be owned by the students. SP believed that the local people must be a very good example in teaching the values of persistency, belief, and toughness. He also emphasized that children must conceive the spirit of hard-work in order to achieve what they had dreamt. This core value was also echoed in the following interview snippets of VSP and TE2.

> "...No easy steps for new school located in suburban area, therefore, we need a spirit to work really hard in order to be valued by other schools or community outside the area. Underestimation is there but we need to prove that we can be a school with lots of achievements." (VSP-snippet1)

> "...As a junior teacher, I have heard that this school used to be underrated by other schools, or even people in town. Now, this school has been a leading school in town, in East Java Province, I think. I am sure that hard-work is there and all achievements are the gifts." (TE2-snippet1)

VSP and TE2 also agreed that hard-work became the second significant core value that shaped the school. They showed that the new-born suburban school must put extra efforts in surviving the school, accelerating the quality, and transforming the underestimation into appreciation. For instance, VSP admitted that the spirit of hard-work must be echoed frequently to increase its quality and, consequently, its prestige. He knew that underrated thoughts were surrounding the school so he did not want to make the negative perspectives affect the school quality. Thus, he worked really hard to alleviate the contiguous stereotypes by creating more school achievements. Similarly, TE2 was sure that being one of leading schools in East Java Province answered the issues and gradually erased the stereotypes. He also said that all

achievements were the gifts. This implied that he agreed when there was a hard-work, there must be an enthralling result. This was also in line with SP's statement "*When you have dreams, you must work hard*".

> "...In a modern era, an honest figure is extraordinary because it is only one out of thousands (with laughing). I have met a teacher when I worked in the previous school. He is my mate in professional scope. He is passionate with being honest and this is reflected to his daily attitudes. He is better to have less money than he must do KKN (corruption, collusion, and nepotism) to have much money." (SP-snippet3)

The above SP's interview snippet inferred that honesty had been an extraordinary value that must be owned by many people living in a modern era. This perspective led him recall his memory about an excellent role model who upheld honesty during daily live activities, known as his teacher colleague in the previous school. SP's teacher colleague did not want to involve him in a case related to corruption, collusion, and nepotism, which were meant to be dishonest attitudes. SP then took this experience as a basis of initiating honesty as the third school's core value.

The above snippets were then confirmed by the communal perspectives undertaken in the FGD. All FGD participants agreed that religiosity, hard-work, and honesty were the three fundamental values that must be exposed to the school environment as identity or brand and the character education offered by the school. These values were expected to be the face of the school so everyone always connect the school with those three values as the identity. This branding was unique since the three values were determined as the core principles of prominent character education in the school. These values, moreover, were expected to produce religious, hardworking, and honest graduates' character profiles. Table 1 summarizes the FGD results regarding the three core values, how they affected the school brand or identity, and the expectations of the graduates' characters.

Table 1. FGD results: Core values affect school brand or identity and develop graduates' character profiles

Core Values	Desired School Brand or Identity and Character Education Model	Expected Graduates' Character Profiles
Religiosity	Suburban school with Islamic teaching Firm religious milieu Competitive school with Islam moral values Practicing Islamic teaching in daily-life activities	Graduates with strong religious principles especially about Islamic values that were reflected in their daily lives
Hard-work	Suburban school with many achievements Authentic inspiration for young generations; from zero to hero Exemplifying a good collaboration Permeating the principles of persistency, consistency, and tenacity in every responsibility	Graduates with strong hard-work value such as persistency, consistency, tenacity, and responsibility that are reflected in daily-life actions to get better self-development
Honesty	Learning with honesty to achieve better performance Honest individual for good social partnership Habituating honest attitudes in daily-life activities	Graduates with firm honesty reflected cognitively, affectively, and in psychomotor.

Articulation of Core Values: Vission, Motto, and School Jargon

The present study found that the school's core values were able to be clearly articulated and promoted consistently to the school community and wider community to introduce the unique characteristics of the school. The school's core values that had been initiated included religiosity, hard-work, and honesty were used as a groundwork and reference in institutional development, educational services, policies, and strategic programs in strengthening character in schools. These values were not only formally recognized as core values that every individual believed in but were also articulated to be more operational, able to create a distinctive impression, and easily recognized by the school community and the wider community. Regarding these values, the public could see a picture of the culture and identity of a school because it was a reflection of what the school stood for. Based on the obtained data, the school's core values were articulated into the school's vision, motto, and jargon.

From these three articulation results, the school expected that these values could become a spirit that could be strongly attached to all elements of the school so that all had the same determination to develop a culture of achievement. First, regardign the school vission, the school's core values were articulated in its vision which stated "Creating an Islamic, Professional, Superior, Trusted, and Environmentally Friendly School". This vision described the school's long-term ideals and goals which reflected the school's core values including religiosity, hard-work, and honesty. This vision was the basis for every policy and program implemented in the school, and was an inspiration for all school members to commit to achieving common goals. SP also argued that this school vision was used to enhance the school quality.

> "...The core values in the school are articulated into the school's vision, because we believe that this school's vision is the common final goal as well as the basis for institutional development so it must truly reflect the school's core values. " (SP-snippet4)

> "...We have succeeded in articulating religious values, hard work and honesty in the school's vision, so we hope that the core values that we have initiated can become the spirit for the transformation of our school." (SP-snippet4)

Apart from that, the school vision also postulated an overview of what differentiated this school from other schools as well as providing an overview of how each individual in the school must behave to achieve common goals. This had been the reason of developing the vision and really reflected the core values initiated, as confirmed by the following statement from SP.

> "...We hope that the school's core values can color the strategies that the school develops. "...Therefore, the school vision really describes our school identity, and it unites us to continue to strengthen these values consistently." (SP-snippet5)

Second, the articulation of the school's core values was in the form of school motto "Islamic, Smart, High-Achieving". This motto carried a spirit that could multiply the energy of the school community to always be involved in every school activity and program. This motto also supported the framing of the school's identity as well as being material for school branding. This consequently made the school better known to the wider community. The religiosity, hard-work, and honesty values operationalized as the school's motto were also easy to understand and become the characteristics of this school. The meaning of this motto described the importance of intelligence and achievement, both in academic and non-academic scopes, which were based on Islamic values. Every student was encouraged to become an outstanding individual and contribute positively to society, taking into account the values that have been instilled.

> "...Intelligent Achievement Islam is the result of the school's articulation of core values to introduce these values to the school community. "Apart from that, we always promote this

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motto every time there is a meeting with teachers, students and parents to introduce our identity as well as profile our graduates." (VSP-snippet2)

Furthermore, the articulation of the core values was in the form of school jargon. This jargon was very familiar among school stakeholders since it was used as a medium to raise enthusiasm when carrying out school activities. The present study found that the school jargon was "Dzikr, Think, Create" describing the balance between the work of soul, brain, and psychomotor. This jargon was often used by students before starting learning, doing activities outside the classroom, and taking part in competitions. This jargon aimed to ensure that positive values could be internalized in the school community, thus, the exposure to character education about religiosity, hard-work, and honesty could be accomplished well.

The Impact of Core Values on School Branding and Parental School Preference

The articulated school core values then gave impact on school branding and parental preference. The present study connected the branding in three forms namely school curriculum, school environment, and official social media, whereas, the parental school preference was interconnected to the three forms of branding. First, there was an impact of the school's core values on school curriculum, environment, and social media. Table 2 describes the impact along with the actions carried out in the school as the practical proofs.

Table 2. The Impact of School Core Values Articulation on School Curriculum, Environment, and Social Media

Impact of Articulation	General Description	Actions Description
School curriculum	Developing an independent curriculum with a block system and implementing various learning strategies, deepening the material using various methods such as brainstorming and project-based which are oriented towards the values of religiosity, hard work and honesty in everyday life.	Starting each meeting and closing it with an Islamic nuance such as saying special greetings and prayers, getting used to using Arabic terminology and terms, integrating Islamic sciences with non-Islamic subjects and extracurricular activities, exaggerating Islamic teachings in additional subjects based on Islam such as the Quran and Hadith, dzurus al-aqidah al-akhlaq, fiqh, and Islamic history, and pouring Islamic ideas into the school's motto, vision and jargon.
School environment	Management of the school environment (e.g., physical, social, and academic environment) was strongly inspired by the school's core values.	The social environment, posters, and wall hangings show the management of the school environment to strengthen the instillation of positive values while strengthening students' characters. The school's core values are the main capital to foster a positive learning climate as a catalyst for character education practices.
School social media	Managing social media in an integrated manner to make the media practical and capable of increasing public awareness of the school, as well as building a strong image.	The school was labeled as an Islamic school with an international nuance from the e-flyer and displays displayed on the school's official website. The school website displays Islamic activities at school, student activities, social actions, and all school programs with English and Arabic translations. This means that

	schools not only focus on religiosity, but also how religiosity can be studied through English and Arabic as internationally recognized languages.

Table 2 implies that the school's core values also played an important role in improving the its brand in the eyes of wider community. The school was able to create a distinctive and easily recognizable identity, which differentiated the school from others. The community and prospective students could see it as a place that provided both quality academic education and character and morality construction. With the alignment of the articulation of three core values in school vision, motto, and jargon, as well as permeating them within school curriculum, environment, and social media, the school had already created a new brand to offer to the societies including the student candidates, their parents, and societies in general. SP stated that, with this typical school branding, the school had been the favorest sub-urban school with competitive quality. "...*Until now, students who have registered at this school have exceeded the target. We are still discussing with the team whether student enrollment can still be increased.*" (SP-snippet6)

This condition shows that the school was able to attract public awareness and increase school preferences among parents. New registrants increased annually and many of them fell prestigious when they could learn here. They must perceive a particular sense of confidence, proudness, and prestige when they could be the official school members. This had been confirmed by the interview resuts undertaken with SU1 and her mother SS1. "...*The school looks so good in term of the building. I feel motivated to study because of the environment is good. I am blessed to be accepted here.*" (SU1-snippet1)

> "...My daughter is happy to study here and so am I. It is difficult to enroll in this school. Many competitors from outside the region. There are some students from the city. I believe that this school has what parents look for (laughing)." (SS1-snippet1)

The consistent application of school core values had positively affected the school branding and parental school preference. SS1 showed that she was absolutely proud that her daughter could study at the school. She implied that being a member of the school was not easy because there were many competitors securing their seats at the school. Thus, once a student was accepted in the school, he was categorized smart. This branding construction generated by parents refered to the success of school management in transforming the underrated sub-urban school into leading school model in town. This achievement should be appreciated when consistenly upholding the school core values in various school sectors.

Discussion

This research found that there are three core values initiated by the school, namely religiosity, hard work and honesty. These values are determined by different stakeholders and reasons. One of them is the NU influence foundation, one of the largest Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia. This basic idea is what founded Islamic-based foundations and schools that are of interest to many people. The school not only cares about developing students' spiritual and religious aspects, but also actively develops various important knowledge and skills needed to support survival in the modern era. The school also focuses on developing the broad academic and practical skills needed across a wide range of sectors. The school curriculum is designed to provide a strong foundation for students in facing global competition (Cahyanto et al., 2024; Rini et al., 2020). In terms of religiosity, schools place a strong emphasis on teaching moral and ethical values based on religious teachings. Several studies have found that religiosity is a value that may be attractive to prospective parents and elementary school students (Davignon, 2014; Jonathan et al., 2023).

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For example, Jonathan et al. (2023) stated that parents must be more careful in choosing an elementary school because elementary school is the foundation for forming their child's character. Syarnubi et al. (2021) also argue that it is important to consider character education at the elementary school level, which is then supported by other research (Hermino & Arifin, 2020; Hidayati et al., 2020). In Indonesia, parents' concerns about their children's education are felt, especially in the modern era like today. Many parents worry that schools do not place enough emphasis on religious teaching, which is considered an important foundation for their children's future (Masturin, 2022; Rini et al., 2021). Parents see rapid social and technological change as a challenge that could erode the religious values that society has long held. They are afraid that their children will grow up weak and not have the character that can help them survive the changing times (Asroni, 2023; Cahyanto et al., 2024).

In this context, religious and character education is considered a fortress that can protect children from negative influences. This research also found that the articulation of a school's core values influences the form of the school curriculum, the environment, and social media as a medium of communication with the wider community. The school has adopted a more holistic approach to education, not only focusing on academic development but also seeking to integrate moral and ethical values into all aspects of the curriculum. Spear et al. (2021) argue that several moral values in character education must be implemented strictly including but not limited to the curriculum and how the school manages its image as an offering. A well-managed and structured curriculum will support the development of student character at school (Pike et al., 2021). This can increase parents' preferences for schools because this articulation provides a brief overview of the school's image (Erickson, 2020).

Apart from that, we found that the articulation of the school's core values was able to transform this school significantly. Previously, this school probably only had a few achievements to be proud of. However, after implementing core values consistently and in a structured manner, extraordinary changes began to be seen in various aspects. This transformation can be seen in the increase in student academic achievement. With core values that emphasize the importance of hard work, honesty and religiosity, students are encouraged to achieve the best in their learning process. These values are reflected in the teacher's teaching approach, which not only focuses on mastering subject matter but also on developing students' character and work ethic. As a result, students not only understand lessons better, but are also motivated to study harder and achieve high academic achievements. These achievements are not only visible in test scores but also in various academic competitions, both at local, national and international levels.

The school's articulation of core values also has a positive impact on students' non-academic achievements. Extracurricular activities that previously might have been less popular have now become very popular. This school now has teams that excel in various fields, such as sports, arts and science. By instilling the values of hard work and honesty, students are taught to not only achieve victory but also to train and compete with integrity. This condition creates a culture of healthy competition in schools where students learn to appreciate effort and process, not just the final result. In this last year, student achievement achieved more than 100 achievements in one year. This creates differences between schools located in the same area as a unique selling point, which benefits the school in dominating people's attention and choices (Kalkan et al., 2020; Nurhayati, 2019). This study suggests further research to conduct quantitative analysis regarding the actual impact of core values in parents' school preferences to strengthen the results of the qualitative data of this study. In addition, it is hoped that future research will be able to collect quantitative data from many parents in determining the school for their children.

In general, this study found that the values of religiosity, hard work, and honesty that are systematically applied in Islamic-based schools play an important role in shaping school culture and increasing parents' preferences in choosing schools. These results are in line with previous studies which emphasize that value-based identity has a significant role in the sustainability and

competitiveness of Islamic schools (Davignon, 2014; Jonathan et al., 2023). According to the theory of school branding and identity Erickson (2020), schools that have value-based differentiation have higher competitiveness than schools that only focus on academic aspects. This study strengthens this theory by showing that the implementation of core values in school management not only improves the image of the institution but also has an impact on students' academic and non-academic achievements. In other words, core values not only play a role in moral and spiritual aspects but are also an effective educational management strategy. In addition, this study shows that value-based transformation can significantly improve school achievement, both in academic and non-academic areas.

This is in accordance with the findings of Kalkan et al. (2020) & Cahyanto (2025) which emphasizes that value-based school differentiation is a unique selling point that contributes to increasing the attractiveness of schools to the community. In the context of character education, this study can be linked to the theory of value-based character education Josephson (2013) which states that effective character formation must be integrated into all aspects of education, including the curriculum, school environment, and social relationships. This study shows that the implementation of the three core values does not only occur in the classroom, but also in school culture, teaching methods, and social interactions between students and teachers. This study is also relevant to the Islamic education management approach Syarnubi et al., (2021) which emphasizes the importance of integrating Islamic values in the school management system. Researchers found that the success of schools is not only in the implementation of value-based education, but also in being able to manage and internalize these values in the education system as a whole.

From an educational management perspective, this study also supports the idea that the success of schools in building a reputation and increasing public trust depends not only on academic aspects, but also on strengthening moral values in every aspect of education. The results of this study contribute to the development of value-based Islamic education management theory, by showing that the success of Islamic schools is not only influenced by the curriculum and facilities, but also by the integration of values in all aspects of school management. In contrast to previous Islamic education management theories that emphasize the role of values in learning (Syarnubi et al., 2021), this study shows that Islamic values can also be used as strategic elements in branding and differentiating Islamic schools. This study proposes that consistently applied core values can be a major factor in increasing the excellence of Islamic schools, both in academic, non-academic, and institutional reputation aspects. This expands the concept of the school effectiveness model Jaelani et al. (2019) & Pike et al. (2021) by adding a value dimension as a key element in increasing the effectiveness of Islamic schools. This model emphasizes that school success depends not only on the academic quality offered, but also on the extent to which schools are able to internalize core values in the learning system, school culture, and institutional branding strategies.

In more detail, this model can be explained through three main mechanisms. First, internalized values contribute to increased learning motivation, which ultimately has an impact on improving students' academic achievement. When the values of hard work and honesty are consistently applied in the school environment, students are more motivated to have a high learning ethic. They understand that academic achievement is not only measured by the final result, but also by the process and effort they make (Ardiansyah et al., 2022; Rini et al., 2020). This strong learning motivation contributes to increased academic achievement, both in the form of test scores, class participation, and success in academic competitions at the local, national, and international levels. This finding is in line with previous studies that highlight the relationship between character education and academic achievement, where students with high levels of integrity and discipline tend to show better academic performance (Lickona, 1991; Davignon, 2014).

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Second, the values embedded in the school culture encourage students' active participation in extracurricular activities, which has an impact on increasing non-academic achievement. Value-based schools build an ecosystem that supports the development of students' interests and talents in various fields, such as sports, arts, and leadership. In an environment that instills hard work and honesty, students are not only encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities but also develop a healthy competitive attitude (Fahriany & Wahyunengsih, 2025; Fernando & Zumratun, 2025). This contributes to improving the school's non-academic achievements, which ultimately strengthens the school's reputation in the eyes of the community. Previous studies have shown that schools with a value-based culture tend to produce students who are more active in organizations and extracurricular activities, which have an impact on improving their social skills, leadership, and competitiveness in the future (Hermino & Arifin, 2020; Hidayati et al., 2020).

Third, clearly articulated core values form a strong school image, which ultimately increases parents' preference in choosing a school. In an era of increasingly fierce educational competition, school branding is a crucial factor influencing parents' decisions in determining school choices for their children. Schools that are able to consistently present their identity and values through various communication platforms, such as social media, brochures, and alumni testimonials, will have a higher appeal than schools that only focus on academic aspects without paying attention to value-based differentiation. Previous research has confirmed that values-based branding is an effective strategy in increasing school attractiveness, because it provides a clear picture of the vision, mission, and quality of education offered (Erickson, 2020; Kalkan et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the initiation and articulation of a school's core values can be a key factor in transforming its brand and character education model. As an Islamic school in a remote area that was previously unpopular among parents, the school faced challenges in attracting prospective students. However, through the establishment and implementation of three core values: religiosity, hard work, and honesty, the school successfully improved its image and strengthened its identity as a leading character-based educational institution. The study findings indicate that before implementing these core values, the school lacked any specializations or advantages that could attract prospective students and parents. However, by integrating these values into the curriculum, school environment, and public communications, the school successfully created a strong sense of differentiation compared to other schools. This process not only strengthened the school's character education model but also increased parents' preference in choosing a school for their children.

Thus, this study implies that the development and communication of strong core values can be an effective strategy for schools, especially Islamic schools, in building reputation, increasing attractiveness, and strengthening the character education model. Furthermore, this study recommends further quantitative studies to measure the specific impact of core values implementation on parental preferences in a more measurable manner. This study is limited to one educational institution, so it cannot be generalized. However, its advantages lie in the depth of analysis of the internal dynamics of school transformation, and theoretically enrich the treasury of Islamic education management studies by emphasizing the importance of initiation and articulation of school core values as a strategy for building a brand and character education in an educational institution.

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