

Building School Brand Image Through Internal Branding and Islamic Branding in an Integrated Islamic Primary School: A Qualitative Case Study with Embedded Descriptive Survey Data from SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan

M. Ibnu Ahmad^a, Arif Mustofa^b

^aArabic Language Education Study Program, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Indonesia

^bArabic Language and Literature Study Program, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Indonesia

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explain how SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan builds and maintains brand image as an elementary school that integrates modern science and Islamic values, as well as how middle-class Muslim perceptions shape their preferences toward the school.

Methods/Design/Approach – The research uses a case study with a qualitative approach strengthened by embedded descriptive quantitative data. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal, vice principal, homeroom teachers, and parents/guardians; observation of school activities; and document analysis. Quantitative data were obtained through a parent questionnaire to map the socioeconomic profile and the weight of decision factors. Qualitative analysis followed an interactive model of reduction, display, and verification, with source and method triangulation.

Findings – Parents interpret the brand image of SDIT Tawakkal as a religious, smart, and noble-character elementary school, as reflected in the consistency of services, an integrated curriculum, habituation of worship, teacher role modeling, and school-home partnerships. Questionnaire results show that the dominant factor of preference is the unique value of the integration of aqliyah and ruhiyah education (65,5%), followed by the school environment (16,8%), teacher quality (11,5%), and aqidah alignment (6,3%). The principles of Islamic branding operate as a normative foundation through the integration of aqidah, sharia, and akhlak in service design and school culture.

Originality/Value – This study affirms that the brand image of SDIT in local nonmetropolitan contexts is primarily shaped by internal branding and the coherence of the service experience, not promotion alone.

Practical Implications – SDIT managers need to position branding as a quality strategy by standardizing services based on unique values, aligning teacher recruitment and development with the school's identity, and maintaining school-home partnerships in an accountable manner and sensitive to privacy.

Keywords brand image, internal branding, integrated Islamic school, middle-class Muslims, Islamic branding.

Paper type Research paper

Article History

Received	1 January 2025
Revised	12 April 2025
	9 June 2025
	28 October 2025
Accepted	27 December 2025

1. Introduction

The development of Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu (SDIT) in Indonesia shows strong acceptance, especially among middle-class Muslims. This phenomenon is reflected in the increasing number of integrated Islamic schools in various regions. Based on Data Pokok Pendidikan of the Directorate General of Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, and Secondary Education for the 2023/2024 academic year, 1,582 Islamic schools are recorded as being under the management of JSIT (Jaringan Sekolah Islam Terpadu). The presence of SDIT enriches the landscape of elementary education that was previously dominated by two institutions more widely known to the public, namely madrasah and public schools. In the context of this article, SDIT is understood as an elementary education institution that integrates the values of Islamic teachings into the learning process and school culture, including strengthening religious practices, fostering akhlak, and an orientation toward academic achievement aligned with modern needs.

One SDIT that has developed in the regions is SDIT Tawakkal, located in Ngadirojo Subdistrict, Pacitan, East Java. Based on initial observations, SDIT Tawakkal is known by the middle-class Muslim community of Pacitan as an elementary school with a religious environment and student character that is considered distinctive compared to elementary schools in general. SDIT Tawakkal is the only elementary school in the Ngadirojo Subdistrict area labeled "Islam Terpadu". This school is in demand among the middle economic community, including lower-middle class, middle-middle class, and upper middle class. Its uniqueness lies in learning that integrates Islamic values with modern science, accompanied by the obligation to memorize Juz 30 (Juz 'Ammah) and several surahs in Juz 29, as well as habituation of congregational prayer at school and at home. This habituation is monitored by homeroom teachers through a communication book and home visits. Economically, the education cost of SDIT Tawakkal is higher than elementary schools and madrasah in the Lorok area, but this condition does not reduce community interest in making it their main choice.

From a market segmentation perspective, initial findings show that SDIT Tawakkal's applicants come from diverse religious organizational backgrounds, such as NU and Muhammadiyah, with distribution not only from Ngadirojo Subdistrict but also from other subdistricts in the Lorok karisidenan area. This applicant group shows a tendency to choose schools that are considered able to guide children's religiosity seriously, so the cost aspect is relatively not positioned as a main obstacle. This condition is in line with the rising Islamic enthusiasm among Indonesia's middle-class Muslims, marked by trends in wearing hijab, increasing awareness of halal consumption, and the growth of Islamic study groups. In a situation of increasing religious enthusiasm, middle-class parents tend to seek quality Islamic education for their sons and daughters (Azra & Jamhari, 2006). Middle-class Muslims in this study follow Wasisto's (2016) conceptualization, namely a social class that makes Islamic values, norms, principles, and symbols an individual or group identity in social behavior and political orientation, and is considered relatively economically established. Other relevant characteristics are shown by Yuswohady and Gani (2015) that middle-class Muslims tend to be conformist, devout in worship, strict in applying Islamic norms, but have limited insight and are relatively less open to Western norms. In the context of educational choice, the orientation "the important thing is it must be Islamic" becomes a dominant consideration for some of this group.

Recent literature shows that middle-class Muslim choices toward Sekolah Islam Terpadu are generally influenced by a combination of beliefs, academic quality, and the socio-religious environment. Suyatno (2013) emphasizes three main factors that encourage preferences toward Sekolah Islam Terpadu, namely belief factors, academic factors, and social factors, as well as a full day school character that facilitates working parents. Findings from Asiah and Isnaeni (2018) strengthen the argument that academic excellence, akhlak education, a full-time school model, and marketing strategies become important preferences so that SDIT is attractive to middle-class Muslims. Meanwhile, other studies show that Islamic educational praxis among the middle class also develops through

nonformal spaces, such as mosques, study groups, family, environment, and social media, and implies changes in individual and social religious behavior (Djazilan, 2016). On the other hand, developments in branding studies show that strengthening the brand of educational institutions is not only related to external promotion, but also requires internal strategies to build identity and overcome organizational resistance. Purwani (2015) found that branding strategies are important to gain public trust through strengthening brand awareness. Whisman (2009) emphasizes the importance of internal branding as an intangible asset in complex educational institutions, through an integrated cultural approach across communication, fundraising, marketing, and personnel policy. At the higher education level, Panda et al. (2016) show that brand image plays a role in student satisfaction, with service quality as a strong factor, and reputation functioning as a positive mediator between brand image and satisfaction. In the Islamic context, the Islamic branding literature also emphasizes that Islamic product characteristics and corporate image are positively associated with brand loyalty and customer loyalty (Polas et al., 2018). However, Saiful Islam and Nursiha (2018) underline that brand definitions that depart from Western frameworks are often not adequate to explain Muslim consumer attitudes, so the principles of faith (aqidah), sharia, and akhlak need to be integrated in developing the definition of Islamic branding.

Although studies on educational institution branding and middle-class Muslim dynamics have developed, previous studies tend to proceed partially based on locus, education level, and conceptual focus. Studies on brand awareness (Purwani, 2015), internal branding in universities (Whisman, 2009), and brand image in cross-country higher education (Panda et al., 2016) do not directly explain how SDIT brand image in local nonmetropolitan contexts is built and interpreted by middle-class Muslims, especially when school religious practices become part of the design of educational services. On the other hand, the Islamic branding literature is more often discussed in the context of products and organizational customer loyalty (Polas et al., 2018) or at the conceptual level of defining Islamic brands (Saiful Islam & Nursiha, 2018), so the empirical space linking Islamic branding principles with the formation of brand image of Islamic educational institutions, including SDIT, still requires deepening. This gap implies limited understanding of how Islamic educational institution branding does not stop at public sympathy and marketing, but also has the potential to build a quality culture through affirming unique values based on Islam.

As a result, the core problem that has not been answered is how SDIT Tawakkal builds and maintains brand image as an elementary school that combines modern science and Islamic values, as well as how middle-class Muslim perceptions shape their preferences toward the school. In line with that, this research is directed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How is SDIT Tawakkal's intended brand image defined and institutionalized in its identity and educational service design?

RQ2. What internal branding strategies are employed to implement and sustain this brand image?

RQ3. How does this brand image shape middle-class Muslim parents' school preferences and decision-making, and which factors are most dominant?

The contributions of this study include: (i) a theoretical contribution by bringing together the study of brand image of educational institutions with the perspective of middle-class Muslims (Wasisto, 2016; Yuswohady & Gani, 2015) and extending the discourse of Islamic branding (Polas et al., 2018; Saiful Islam & Nursiha, 2018); (ii) an empirical contribution through mapping the formation of SDIT brand image in the local context of Pacitan which has distinctive socio-religious characteristics and educational preferences; and (iii) a practical contribution in the form of implications for SDIT managers in designing branding strategies that are not merely promotion, but also strengthening organizational culture and service quality (Whisman, 2009; Panda et al., 2016). With this

focus, this research is expected to offer a more operational formulation regarding the development of brand image of Islamic educational institutions based on unique Islamic values, so that it has the potential to enrich the discourse on the relationship between branding, quality, and middle-class Muslim preferences toward Islamic education (Azra & Jamhari, 2006; Asiah & Isnaeni, 2018).

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Context

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand processes, meanings, and social practices in natural settings through data from speech, actions, and documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The selected design is a case study because it aligns with the research objectives that require a contextual understanding of the formation and maintenance of SDIT brand image, including its links with middle-class Muslim perceptions and the principles of Islamic branding (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The research case is SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan in Ngadirojo Subdistrict, Pacitan Regency, East Java, with boundaries on school practices, policies, and value communications related to brand image. This study is positioned as a single case with embedded data sources that include internal and external actors (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

2.2. Participants and Informant Selection Strategy

Participants consist of: (1) internal school actors, namely the principal, vice principal, and homeroom teachers, and (2) external actors, namely parents or guardians who represent middle-class Muslims as parties who assess and choose schools, thus relevant to answering RQ1 and strengthening RQ2 and RQ3. Informant selection used criterion-based purposive sampling based on involvement and knowledge of the brand image formation process (Patton, 2015). To capture contextual variation as described in the Introduction, parents or guardians were directed toward diversity in religious organizational backgrounds, domicile distribution, and experiences of interaction with school programs. Recruitment was conducted until thematic saturation was reached, namely when additional interviews no longer produced substantively new themes (Guest et al., 2006).

2.3. Data Sources and Data Collection

Primary data were collected through interviews, observation, field notes, and a structured questionnaire, while secondary data were obtained from school documents. The interviews were semi-structured to explore perceptions of brand image, the dominant factors shaping it across the dimensions of beliefs, academics, and the socio-religious environment, as well as the linking of Islamic values within Islamic branding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Observation was conducted to record practices representing the school's identity and services, including religious activities, learning, and forms of school interaction with parents (Spradley, 1980). The questionnaire was used to map the socioeconomic profile of parents/guardians (for example, income and expenditure) and to identify the weight of consideration factors in choosing SDIT Tawakkal; questionnaire results were analyzed descriptively in percentages as supplementary data to strengthen the reading of findings and triangulation with interview, observation, and document results (Huddleston, 1976; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Documents reviewed included the curriculum,

student data, program and policy documents, school-parent communication artifacts, and school website content to examine message consistency, practices, and administrative traces related to branding strategy and internal branding (Bowen, 2009; Whisman, 2009). The researcher served as the main instrument supported by an interview guide, observation sheets, field notes, a questionnaire instrument, and a recording device on a mobile phone (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

2.4. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis followed an interactive model that includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, which occur cyclically and iteratively (Miles & Huberman, 1992). Interview data were transcribed, observation and document data were organized, then initial coding was conducted directly linked to RQ1 through RQ3. Categories and themes were developed through comparisons across data sources and across informants, and verified by assessing the adequacy of evidence and considering alternative explanations so that interpretations remain auditable (Miles & Huberman, 1992; Yin, 2014). The trustworthiness of findings was strengthened through method and source triangulation by comparing interview, observation, and document results (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher also conducted selective member checking on key interpretive summaries, compiled an audit trail of analytic decisions, and conducted peer debriefing to assess interpretive coherence and minimize bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.5. Ethics

Before data collection, the researcher obtained permission from the school. All participants were provided an explanation of the research purpose, the form of participation, the right to refuse, and the right to discontinue participation at any time, and then participation approval was collected through informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of informant identities, as well as secure data storage with restricted access. The principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, and risk minimization were applied in accordance with social and qualitative research ethics (Israel & Hay, 2006; Orb et al., 2001).

3. Results

3.1 The Brand Image Built by SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan

Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu (SDIT) "Tawakkal" is one educational unit at the elementary school level in Ngadirojo Subdistrict, Pacitan Regency, East Java. Based on observations and school documents, in carrying out its activities SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan is under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Learning at SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan is conducted for a full day over six working days. SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan, which has been established since 2012/2013, applies an integrated management model by continuously making improvements to realize educational goals and the expected quality. In addition, in its management activities, SDIT Tawakkal has implemented a full day school learning system in which all student activities are packaged in an integrated education system.

There are two interesting things about SDIT Tawakkal, namely the labels "Islam Terpadu" and "Tawakkal". According to the principal of Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu Tawakkal, the name "Tawakkal" is a philosophy of a struggle and maximal effort in achieving goals. Meanwhile, what is meant by the term "Islam Terpadu" in the name SD-IT is a depiction of Islam that is comprehensive in all aspects of life. It is not limited to concepts and theories in school but is practiced in everyday life.

The SDIT Tawakkal curriculum refers to the national curriculum, with development adjusted to Islamic values that form the institution's foundation. In practice, SDIT Tawakkal in implementing instruction combines science education and Islamic religious education as a unified curriculum. It does not dichotomize between science and religion, nor is there secularization and sacralization in the sense that religion is taught separately from the context of present and future life. General subject matter is wrapped with Islamic foundations, guidelines, and norms. Meanwhile, religious subject matter is expanded according to contemporary context, usefulness, and the benefit of the ummah. In addition, based on field observations, SDIT Tawakkal, starting from the label "Islam terpadu" and "Tawakkal", emphasizes integrated use of learning approaches so that it can simultaneously optimize cognitive, affective, and conative competencies. The implication is that teachers are required to develop creative and varied learning approaches by using flexible and broad media and learning resources.

SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan develops intellectual and spiritual abilities, improves the quality of faith and piety to Allah SWT, develops noble character, and presents health, physical fitness, and skills in students' daily lives so that children become reflective. Interview results with the principal of SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan found that the learning offered is very comprehensive in the form of general basic education and religious instruction. The classes include Islamic religious education, civic education, Indonesian language, mathematics, science, social studies, arts and culture, and physical education. Meanwhile, the local content category contains more lessons about Islam. This category includes Aqida Akhlaq, Hadits Al-Quran, Fiqh, Tarif, Arab, English, Tafiz, Tahsin Al-Quran. Tahsin and Tahfidzul Qur'an programs are conducted from Grade I to Grade VI. This program is also combined with bina sholat conducted in stages according to student development.

Table 1. Al-Qur'an Learning Targets for Grades 1-6

Grade	Achievement and Target	Notes
I	Completion of volume 1	Wafa book
II	Completion of volumes 2 and 3	Wafa book
III	Completion of volumes 4 and 5	Wafa book
IV	Completion of volume 6 and Juz 1	Wafa book and Al-Qur'an
V	Tartil Juz 2 and 3	Al-Qur'an
VI	Tartil Juz 4 and 5	Al-Qur'an

Meanwhile, the Tahfidzul Qur'an program is implemented every day, for the muftadi' class, namely Grades 1-3. The technical implementation uses the talaqqi method, with murajaah in the morning before learning at 07.00-07.30 WIB. Meanwhile, for the mutaqoddim class, namely Grades 4-6, tahsin is implemented after learning ends, namely ba'dha sholat dhuhur berjama'ah with guidance from the tahfidz teacher of each group. According to a homeroom teacher at SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan, this aims so that students memorize by themselves without feeling burdened, so it will become better and increase every day because it becomes a daily habit. The tahfidzul Qur'an material at SDIT Tawakkal is as follows.

Table 2. Juz Amma Memorization Achievement in Each Grade

Grade	Achievement and Target	Notes
I	Memorize surahs An Naas - Al Qoriah	Lower grades (1-3) ✓ Technical implementation with talaqqi, murajaah in the morning before learning (07.00-07.30 WIB).
II	Memorize surahs Al 'Adiyat - Adh Dhuha	

Grade Achievement and Target	Notes
III Memorize surahs Al Lail - Al Ghasyiyah	
IV Memorize surahs Al A'laa - Al Muthoffifin	Upper grades (4-6) ✓ Schedule after learning, ba'dha dhuhur. ✓ With the tahfidz teacher of each group
V Memorize surahs Al Infithar - An Naba	
VI Memorize surahs An Naas - An Naba	

The vice principal of SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan conveyed that student guardians are encouraged to be involved in guiding and accompanying their children in carrying out school activities. This is because an integrated system means that the school and parents work together in educating children. Thus, Islamic children are formed both when they are in the school environment and in the family. According to data from the education office branch of Pacitan Regency in 2021, Ngadirojo Subdistrict has 45 elementary schools, both public and private. Of that number, SDIT Tawakkal is the only elementary school labeled "Islam Terpadu". In the context of competition, "Islam Terpadu" elementary schools certainly have competitiveness more than other elementary schools, namely the label "Islam Terpadu" becomes a distinct attraction, especially among Muslim communities. In addition, this school also has fairly good academic and non-academic achievements. Since its establishment, this school has carried the vision "Terwujudnya Generasi yang Religius, Cerdas, dan Berkarakter Mulia" so that it is then known by the community as an Islamic-labeled elementary school that is religious, enlightens, and prioritizes fostering noble character. This vision becomes an identity that differentiates it from other schools.

Based on data from interviews, observations, and documentation above, it is known that the religious, smart, and noble-character brand has been designed and planned by the school from the beginning. The inclusion of the labels religious, smart, and noble character is not without reason, but is based on environmental analysis and market needs. Environmental analysis is based on the Islamic nuance of the Lorok community at that time which appeared barren even though at that time the community's Islamic enthusiasm began to increase. In addition, the needs analysis is based on the needs of the Muslim community for the emergence of a quality Islamic educational institution, in terms of spirituality, akhlak, and academics, where at that time there was not yet a quality Islamic elementary school.

The use of the words religious, intellectual, and of noble character is an effort to build the image of a comprehensive Islamic school, which must be aligned with the development of science and technology. The word integrated becomes the school's foundation and is used as a symbol of the development of science and technology and the integration of Islamic knowledge. The birth of an integrated concept as knowledge and the development of student character based on Islamic teachings will ultimately lead students not only to merely obtain Islamic knowledge, but Islamic teachings become the foundation of every student action in daily life. Meanwhile, the designed curriculum has succeeded in Islamizing the learning process in the classroom with the aim of forming Islamic awareness and patterns of thinking.

This positive brand image is a major asset for SDIT Tawakkal because the brand image has significantly influenced the perceptions of the middle-class Muslim community toward the operations of the educational institution. The determination of the brand image of SDIT Tawakkal as an Islamic school that is religious, enlightening, and prioritizes fostering noble character is carried out in three stages: (1) strengthening commitment with sincere intentions to do da'wah, without strong and sincere intentions from all members of the school community efforts to build the brand image will be difficult to realize; (2) internal

and external analysis by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of competing elementary schools as well as the needs of the Muslim community for quality education along with increasing Islamic enthusiasm among the middle-class Muslim community of Pacitan; and (3) the determination of the school's vision and mission based on ruhiyah and aqliyah aspects.

3.2 Strategy for Building Brand Image among Middle-Class Muslims

The strategy for building the brand image of SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan among the middle-class Muslim community involves strategic planning and strategy implementation. Based on observation, interviews, and documentation, the strategic plan for building the brand image of SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan includes several elements. The strategic steps for brand image formation based on determinants are more directed toward an internal brand strategy or internal brand strategy.

SDIT Tawakkal has special characteristics that distinguish it from schools or madrasah in general. Integrative Islamic schools seek to strengthen religious values from an integrated perspective. This empowerment is realized in the form of Islamization of all aspects of educational activities at school, from habituation to extracurricular activities and all learning in other classrooms. In addition, SDIT Tawakkal also has a curriculum that combines general education and religious education, but the dichotomy of the curriculum remains a major problem for Islamic education in Indonesia to this day. According to the head of SDIT, the results of integrating the general education curriculum and religious education are practiced in students' daily activities. Therefore, integrated Islamic schools are essentially schools that practice the concept of Islamic education based on the Al-Quran and As-Sunnah. The operational concept of integrated Islamic schools is an accumulation of Islamic religious teachings, Islamic culture, and the process of acculturation of civilization, inheritance, and development from generation to generation. What is meant by integrated is strengthening Islam itself, meaning that Islam is not partial, but syumuliyah and not juziyyah, whole and comprehensive. This is what becomes the main spirit of the da'wah movement in the field of education as "resistance" to secularism, dichotomy, and juziyyah.

In other words, SDIT Tawakkal is an Islamic school organized by integrating Islamic values and teachings integratively within the curriculum structure with an effective learning approach and optimal and cooperative involvement between teachers and parents, as well as the community, to foster students' character and competence. According to the vice principal for curriculum, the integration of the material is provided when learning reflection is conducted. In implementing the integration of general education material and religious education material, it requires a teacher figure who is capable, not only having pedagogical competence in the field of general education, but also having adequate knowledge in the field of Islamic studies.

SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan also integrates aqliyah, ruhiyah, and jasadiyah education. This means that Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu Tawakkal seeks to educate students to become children whose reasoning and intellectual abilities develop, improve the quality of their faith and piety to Allah SWT, have noble character fostered, and also have health, fitness, and skills in their daily lives. Interview results with the head of SDIT Tawakkal found that the school not only integrates religious education material with general education material, but also seeks to integrate the learning environment by increasing the involvement and active participation of the learning environment, namely: school, home, and community.

Based on the data above, overall the strategy for building the brand image of Islamic schools among the middle-class Muslim community as carried out by SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan can be described as follows:

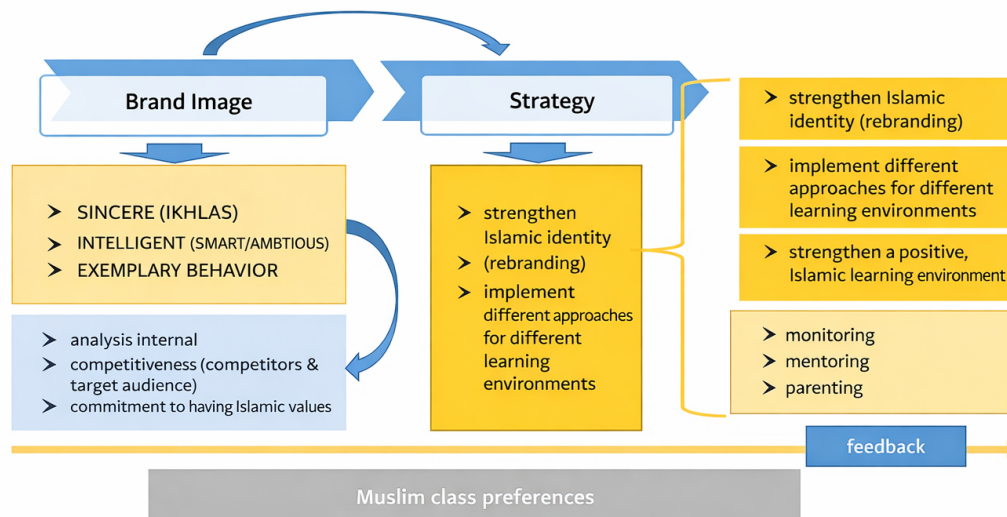


Figure 1. Three stage model of building the brand image of an Islamic school in the middle class Muslim community

The figure above explains that there are two important stages in building the brand image of Sekolah Islam Terpadu Tawakkal Pacitan, namely first the determination of brand image and second the formation of brand image. In determining the brand image as an Islamic school that is religious, smart in its aqliyah and ruhiyah, and noble in its character, three strategic steps are needed: (1) Internal analysis, this is important to do in order to identify readiness and the availability of resources that can support the implementation of the brand image. If the brand image to be built is not supported by adequate resources, it will require a longer time; (2) External analysis, namely an analysis of changes in the community's religious behavior (increasing ghriroh/Islamic enthusiasm in the community, the hijrah trend, etc.), social change, as well as the basic education model developed by Islamic schools in the competitive area. The purpose of this external analysis is to map the market and determine the target market. In addition, by conducting external analysis, the institution will more easily find and determine a brand image that is unique, attractive, and different from the brand image of other educational institutions; (3) Strengthening commitment and the intention of da'wah, to determine such a brand image requires commitment and strong intentions from all parties, and strong commitment and intentions will give rise to attitudes, behavior, and hard work without expecting rewards. Without commitment and sincere intentions, the brand image of the institution to be built will be difficult to realize.

Meanwhile, the formation of the brand image of SDIT Tawakkal as a school that is religious/Islamic, smart in aqliyah and ruhiyah, and of noble character is carried out with several strategic steps, namely:

First, Strengthen identity, namely strengthening self-identity as an Islamic school is carried out by: (a) creating a learning environment with Islamic nuances such as habituation of greetings, the habit of dressing in an Islamic manner, congregational prayer, reading the Alqur'an, and memorizing daily prayers. The aim is to form habits that refer to superior universal Islamic values. For that reason, habits from the smallest to the largest aspects receive special attention from SDIT Tawakkal. Habits are one of the educational objectives that are emphasized. Although it must begin with awareness of the heart, to become a personality characteristic it requires a long and continuous habituation process. (b) Teacher role modeling, SDIT Tawakkal teachers are selected strictly because of the belief that teachers are not only a source of scientific learning but also a source of global learning. As in the prophetic function of the Prophet, teachers must become true role models (uswatun hasanah). (c) Memorizing Juz Amma, although memorization is not the

main benchmark of a person's worship practice, memorization is often a benchmark of a person's piety among middle-class Muslims. This makes middle-class Muslim parents feel proud if their elementary school-aged child can memorize Juz 30 and/or certain letters in the Al-Quran.

Second, different advantages, namely by integrating ruhiyah education and aqliyah education through the teaching and learning process and the development of an Islam-based curriculum. To develop the aqliyah aspect at SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan refers to the national curriculum, namely the 2013 curriculum, while for fostering the ruhiyah aspect SDIT Tawakkal develops a special local curriculum for Islamic materials. In addition, the approach used by SDIT Tawakkal in the teaching and learning process uses an integrated approach, namely all subject matter and environmental formation are sought to truly be centered on Islamic values.

Third, strengthen synergy, namely by synergizing the tri centers of education: school, home, and community. To produce students who have excellence in the aqliyah aspect and the ruhiyah aspect requires cooperation with all parties, especially in creating a supportive environment for that development. Therefore, it is necessary to build synergy between the school environment and the home environment where students live. One way to synergize these environments is through the home visit program, where teachers once a week visit the village where students live or their homes to know the development of their students, in addition to through the communication book and parent training in educating their sons and daughters.

3.3 The Impact of Brand Image on Middle-Class Muslim Preferences

Various efforts and strategies carried out by the management of SDIT Tawakkal in building the school's brand image among the community have received a fairly good response, especially from middle-class Muslims. The economic condition of middle-class Muslim parents/guardians of SDIT Tawakkal students is included in the adequate category. Based on data from the research questionnaire, the average income of students' parents (57,1%) is Rp 12 million to more than Rp 50 million per year. These data show that students' parents are included in the lower-middle class and middle-middle class economic categories.

Table 3. Average Income/Year

No	Average income	Percentage
1	> 50.000.000	10,7 %
2	> 25.000.000	14,3 %
3	> 12.000.000	32,1 %
4	< 12.000.000	42,9 %

The classification of the middle class itself is measured through income between USD 2 to USD 20 per capita per day. In detail, for the poor middle group, expenditure is below Rp 1 million per month, and the middle class group has expenditure of Rp 2 million to Rp 3 million per month, while the upper middle class has expenditure between Rp 3 million to Rp 5 million per month. From these data, the middle-class group of SDIT Tawakkal students' parents is dominated by the lowest middle class (poor middle). Meanwhile, the average expenditure of middle-class Muslim parents of SDIT Tawakkal students is between Rp. 26 thousand to Rp. 130 per day, as in the following table.

Table 4. Average Parent Expenditure/Day

No	Expenditure range	Percentage
1	26.000 – 52.000	46,4 %
2	52.000 – 130.000	35,7 %
3	130.000 – 260.000	10,7 %
4	Uncertain	7,2 %

Based on the table of parent expenditure ranges above, it can be said that the majority of SDIT Tawakkal students' parents are in the lower-middle class and middle-middle class economy (89,3%) and the remainder (10,7%) are in the upper-middle class economy. These parents of SDIT Tawakkal students work in various fields: civil servant teachers, entrepreneurs, traders, and employees as in the following table:

Table 5. Occupation/Profession of Parents

No	Occupation of students' parents	Percentage
1	Civil servant (PNS)	10 %
2	Self-employed	35,7 %
3	Trader	7,1 %
4	Private-sector employee	47,2 %

Based on the data above, the majority (90%) of first-grade students' parents at SDIT Tawakkal work as private-sector workers (non-PNS). These data illustrate that the market segment of SDIT Tawakkal is more in demand among private-sector workers who usually, in fact, have less religious knowledge and education when compared to parents who work as civil servant teachers. This market segment can be grouped into the santri abangan segment, characterized by their educational principle "pokoke sekolah Islam" and being less open to and accepting new things.

In choosing education for their children, this middle class prefers educational institutions that are considered to have quality and to be better than other schools, especially in their religious education. Based on the research results, there are four factors that influence parents' decisions in determining educational institutions for their children, namely (1) the unique value factor; (2) the environment factor; (3) the teacher quality factor; and (4) the aqidah factor, as in the following table:

Table 6. Factors Influencing Parents' Decisions

No	Factors influencing parents' decisions	Percentage
1	Unique value factor; Integration between learning Islamic values (Ilahiyah) and knowledge (scientific), to produce students who are smart-religious/sholeh through habituation of obligatory and Sunnah worship from an early age, reading and memorizing the al qur'an, activities oriented toward instilling noble akhlaq, discipline, and independence.	65,5 %
2	Environment factor; Comfortable, safe, and religious school far from noise	16,8 %
3	Teacher quality factor; Inspiring, patient, and serving (accompanying and giving more attention)	11,5 %
4	Belief factor; Instilling aqidah in accordance with what is expected by parents	6,3 %

Among the four factors that influence students' parents in determining their choice of SDIT Tawakkal as in the table above, the unique value factor (65,5%) plays a very strong role in influencing parents' decisions, while the other three factors (teacher quality, environment, and aqidah) are supporting factors that influence parents' preferences. This

shows that the efforts made by the management of SDIT Tawakkal are directly proportional to the needs of the middle-class Muslim community of Pacitan in terms of educational preferences for their children, namely superior schools with distinctive Islamic characteristics. These data can also be interpreted to mean that branding of low-cost schools with adequate facilities is not sufficient to attract middle-class Muslim sympathy. Middle-class Muslims are more interested in branding based on competitive advantages and unique values. For middle-class Muslims, expensive education costs are not too much of a problem, the most important thing is that their children obtain good Islamic religious knowledge and at the same time learn modern sciences. With both provisions, it is expected that their children are not only smart in modern scientific knowledge but also have spiritual depth and the greatness of *akhlak*.

The research results show that parents want their children to be intellectually (*aqliyah*) and spiritually (*ruhiyah*) intelligent, children who are pious, able to pray correctly, able to read the Al-Quran fluently, memorize some verses of the Al-Quran, and have noble character becomes the main choice of parents. The entirety of the four factors that influence the preferences of these middle-class Muslim parents is a true representation of the overall educational process carried out by SDIT Tawakkal.

4. Discussion

This study aims to explain how SDIT Tawakkal builds and maintains brand image as an elementary school that combines modern science and Islamic values, as well as how middle-class Muslim perceptions shape their preferences. This focus is relevant because studies of educational institution branding, middle-class Muslim dynamics, and Islamic branding are often discussed partially, so the mechanism of SDIT brand image formation in local nonmetropolitan contexts still requires further exploration. By referring to studies on preferences toward SDIT which are generally influenced by beliefs, academic quality, and the socio-religious environment (Suyatno, 2013; Asiah & Isnaeni, 2018), the findings of this study confirm that school brand image is more appropriately understood as the result of service consistency and internal branding, not merely promotion (Whisman, 2009).

The main findings show that middle-class Muslim parents assess SDIT Tawakkal through a religious, smart, and noble-character image embodied in the service experience. This answers RQ1 by showing that public perception is formed when the identity communicated by the school is aligned with daily practices and school interactions with families. RQ2 is answered through the finding that the most prominent factor in the formation of brand image is unique value, namely the integration of *aqliyah* and *ruhiyah* education operationalized through an integrated curriculum, religious habituation, strengthening role modeling, as well as school-home synergy. Meanwhile, the environment, teacher quality, and *aqidah* alignment function as supporting factors that strengthen parents' confidence in service quality. RQ3 shows that the principles of Islamic branding are present not merely as a label, but as a normative foundation that links *aqidah*, *sharia*, and *akhlak* into service design and school culture, in line with the idea that brand conceptualization for Muslim consumers needs to include these dimensions (Saiful Islam & Nursiha, 2018).

These results are in line with the literature that positions SDIT as a choice due to the combination of *akhlak* fostering, academic quality, a religious environment, and a full-time school format that provides a sense of security for families (Suyatno, 2013; Asiah & Isnaeni, 2018). The findings are also consistent with the view that the internalization of religiosity intertwines with family and environment, so strategies that connect school and home have the potential to strengthen habit formation (Djazilan, 2016). However, this study shows a slightly different emphasis because the dominant factor in preference is not beliefs alone, but the unique value of services that makes the integration of Islam and science a concrete experience. This difference can be understood as a boundary condition: when the orientation "the important thing is it must be Islamic" has become a general prerequisite among some middle-class Muslims (Wasisto, 2016; Yuswohady & Gani, 2015), *aqidah*

alignment tends to become a necessary condition, but competitive differentiation emerges from the consistency of operationalizing Islamic values in educational services.

Theoretically, the findings strengthen the idea that brand image is an intangible asset formed by the coherence of identity, service experience, and consumer associations, thus becoming a source of differentiation (Kapferer, 2008). The findings also confirm the importance of reputation and public trust in encouraging interest, as well as their vulnerability to mismatch between messages and practices (Ylikoski, 2001; Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Within the internal branding framework, the case of SDIT Tawakkal shows that the brand is "activated" through the alignment of vision, teacher role-modeling standards, habituation routines, and a partnership system with parents, so that brand associations become more robust because they are supported by repeated practices (Whisman, 2009; Aaker in Faircloth et al., 2001; Keller, 2013). On the Islamic branding side, this study extends the understanding that the "product" of education is a service package, so that Islamic character is reflected in the institutionalization of values of faith, sharia, and akhlak in the curriculum, culture, and service relations, consistent with findings that Islamic product characteristics are related to loyalty (Polas et al., 2018).

The practical implication is that SDIT branding needs to be positioned as an organizational quality strategy. Effective differentiation emerges when unique values are translated into a consistent and experienceable service design, rather than stopping at slogans. Because role modeling and the quality of teacher mentoring strengthen image, teacher selection and development need to be aligned with school identity, including pedagogical competence and the capacity for contextual religious guidance. School-home synergy needs to be maintained as an educative partnership that has clear guidelines and respects family privacy, so that strengthening religious habitus does not transform into counterproductive control. In addition, reputation needs to be managed through transparency, service consistency, and accountable communication because public trust is easily eroded by inconsistency.

The limitations of the study are mainly related to the single case design in a local context, so transferability to regions with different competitive structures of Islamic schools needs caution. Perception data from parents and school actors also have the potential to be influenced by normative bias or social desirability. In addition, students' experiences have not been explored in depth, even though they are important to assess the alignment between brand promises and learning experiences.

Further research can be directed to comparative multi-case studies between SDIT in nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas to test the stability of the dominance of "unique value" in various competitive contexts. Longitudinal research is needed to see the dynamics of brand image, loyalty, and reputation along with changes in leadership, teachers, and policies. Research that includes student and alumni perspectives is also important to assess the internalization of brand promises in practices and dispositions. Finally, the development of an operational model of Islamic branding for educational services is needed, for example through indicators of *aqidah*, *sharia*, and *akhlak* in school service standards, then testing their relationships with trust, satisfaction, and loyalty more systematically.

5. Conclusion

Based on a qualitative case study at SDIT Tawakkal Pacitan, this study confirms that school brand image is primarily formed through service consistency and internal branding. Middle-class Muslim parents interpret SDIT Tawakkal through a religious, smart, and noble-character image because the identity communicated by the school is evidenced in daily practices, integrated curriculum management, and the school's relations with families.

The research questions have been answered. RQ1 shows that parents' perceptions strengthen when brand promises are aligned with service experiences, especially religious habituation, teacher role modeling, and school-home partnerships. RQ2 confirms that the most prominent factor shaping brand image is the unique value of integrating *aqliyah* and

ruhiyah education, which is realized through integration of the national curriculum and Islamic content, tahsin-tahfidz and bina salat programs, strengthening school culture, and synergy of the tri centers of education. The school environment, the quality of teacher mentoring, and aqidah alignment function as supporting factors. RQ3 shows that the principles of Islamic branding serve as a normative foundation by integrating aqidah, sharia, and akhlak into service design and culture, so that the label "Islam terpadu" operates as a principle of educational implementation.

The practical implication is that SDIT managers need to place branding as a quality strategy. Differentiation based on unique values will be sustainable when it is translated into consistent service standards, through ensuring teacher role modeling and mentoring capacity, strengthening habituation routines, and an educative partnership with parents that is accountable and sensitive to privacy.

The study limitations include a single case nonmetropolitan design, potential normative bias in perception data, and the lack of in-depth exploration of students' experiences. Further research needs to include comparative multi-case studies, longitudinal studies, inclusion of student and alumni perspectives, and the development of an operational model of Islamic branding based on indicators of aqidah, sharia, and akhlak to test their relationships with trust, satisfaction, and loyalty more systematically.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

M. Ibnu Ahmad: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Visualization; Writing - Original Draft; Project administration.

Arif Mustofa: Methodology; Validation; Formal analysis; Writing - Review & Editing; Supervision.

Funding statement

This research was funded by internal research funds from Universitas Negeri Malang (Grant No. DIPA: 025.04.2.423812/2021).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

Ethical approval was obtained from Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (Protocol No. 49357311). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data were collected and analysed anonymously.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to the **Corresponding Author**, M. Ibnu Ahmad, at ✉ m.ibnuahmed@pba.uin-malang.ac.id

ORCID

M. Ibnu Ahmad  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2689-6354>

Arif Mustofa  -

References

- Aaker, D. A. (1991). *Managing brand equity: Capitalizing on the value of a brand name*. Free Press.
- Asiah, N., & Isnaeni, A. (2018). Inklinasi masyarakat Muslim kelas menengah terhadap Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu di Bandar Lampung. *Al-Tadzkiyyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.24042/atjpi.v9i2.3452>
- Azra, A., & Jamhari. (2006). *Pendidikan Islam Indonesia dan tantangan globalisasi: Perspektif sosio-historis*. Rajawali Press.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research: An introduction to theory and methods*. Allyn & Bacon.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Cretu, A. E., & Brodie, R. J. (2007). The influence of brand image and company reputation where manufacturers market to small firms: A customer value perspective [Unpublished manuscript]. Department of Marketing, University of Auckland.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- Djazilan, M. S. (2018). *Pendidikan Islam informal pada kelas menengah Muslim di Surabaya (Studi tentang sosialisasi dan internalisasi nilai keislaman melalui forum dakwah keagamaan di Surabaya)* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation].
- Faircloth, J. B., Capella, L. M., & Alford, B. L. (2001). The effect of brand attitude and brand image on brand equity. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 61–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2001.11501897>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Huddleston, T., Jr. (1976). Marketing the applicant questionnaire. *College and University*, 214–220.
- Islam, M. S. B. I., & Nursiha, B. A. (2016). Islamic brand: A conceptual definition of brand from Islamic perspective. *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, 4(2), 59–71. <https://doi.org/10.15640/jisc.v4n2a6>
- Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists*. SAGE Publications.
- Janonis, V., & Virvilaitė, R. (2007). Brand image formation. *Engineering Economics*, 2(52), 78–90.
- Kapferer, J.-N. (2008). *The new strategic brand management: Creating and sustaining brand equity long term* (4th ed.). Kogan Page.
- Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic brand management: Building, measuring and managing brand equity* (4th ed.).
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1992). *Analisis data kualitatif* (T. Rohandi, Trans.). Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2001.00093.x>
- Panda, S., Pandey, S. C., Bennett, A., & Tian, X. (2019). University brand image as competitive advantage: A two-country study. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 33(2), 234–251. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2017-0374>

- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Polas, M. R. H., Asghar, A. J., & Rahman, M. L. (2018). Islamic branding as a tool for customer retention: Antecedents and consequences of Islamic brand loyalty. *International Journal of Islamic Marketing and Branding*, 3(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJIMB.2018.091648>
- Purwani, D. A. (2015). Brand awareness. *Jurnal Social Ilmu Politik Universitas Hasanuddin Makasar*, 1(1).
- Raharjo, W. (2016). *Politik kelas menengah Indonesia*. LP3ES.
- Roy, D., & Banerjee, S. (2008). CARE-ing strategy for integration of brand identity with brand image. *International Journal of Commerce and Management*, 17(1–2), 140–148.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/10569210710776512>
- Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. SAGE Publications.
- Suyatno. (2013). Sekolah Islam Terpadu: Filsafat, ideologi, dan tren baru pendidikan Islam di Indonesia. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 2(2), 356–376.
<https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2013.22.355-377>
- Whisman, R. (2009). Internal branding: A university's most valuable intangible asset. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 18(5), 367–370.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/10610420910981846>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Ylikoski, T. (2001). *Unohtuiko asiakas? KY-Palvelu Oy*.
- Yuswohadi, & Gani, K. E. (2015). *8 wajah kelas menengah*. Gramedia.