



Strategic Implementation of Public Relations Management in Strengthening School Branding and Enhancing Public Trust in Islamic Primary Education

Muhammad Taufiq*, Diningrum Citraningsih

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Terpadu Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email : taufiqpati112@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

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*Corresponding Author

This study aims to analyze the implementation of public relations management in enhancing school branding within an Islamic primary education institution. The research focuses on the execution of public relations functions, communication strategies, supporting and inhibiting factors, and their contribution to shaping the school's image. This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving the school principal as the main informant. The data were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques. The findings indicate that public relations management has not been systematically organized and still tends to function administratively rather than strategically. Although the school has implemented various communication strategies with parents and the community through meetings and social media, school branding is primarily strengthened by flagship programs and institutional achievements. The study implies that strengthening organizational structure, communication planning, and human resources in public relations management is essential to develop sustainable and competitive school branding.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasingly competitive development of the education sector requires educational institutions not only to focus on academic quality but also to establish a positive image or school branding within society. School branding has become an important aspect because parents and communities tend to choose schools that possess a strong reputation, excellent programs, and trustworthy public communication. In this context, public relations management plays a strategic role as a bridge between schools and the public in delivering information, building communication, and creating positive perceptions toward educational institutions. Effective public relations management can strengthen

school image through planned communication activities, promotion of flagship programs, and active community involvement (Jaelani et al., 2024). Furthermore, systematic and sustainable public relations strategies contribute significantly to improving institutional competitiveness amid the growing competition among schools (Karyati & Tinah, 2025). Therefore, strengthening public relations management is essential not only for institutional sustainability but also for increasing public trust and maintaining the competitiveness of educational institutions in modern society.

Despite the strategic importance of public relations management, many educational institutions still face challenges in implementing it effectively. The increasing number of educational institutions has intensified competition among schools, forcing them to compete in attracting prospective students and maintaining public trust. However, many schools continue to prioritize academic achievement while neglecting communication management and institutional branding. As a result, schools often struggle to differentiate themselves from competing institutions and fail to establish a strong public image. According to (Haerani et al., 2025), school reputation and branding are among the primary factors influencing parents' decisions when selecting educational institutions, alongside academic quality and social media exposure. In addition, poor communication with parents and communities can reduce public confidence and weaken institutional credibility. Consequently, ineffective public relations management may negatively affect school competitiveness and sustainability. These conditions indicate that school success is not solely determined by academic quality but also by the institution's ability to establish effective communication and strong social relationships with the community.

The phenomenon of weak public relations implementation can also be observed in Islamic primary educational institutions, particularly Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology processed by the Central Statistics Agency of Central Java Province (2024) indicate that Indonesia has more than 305,000 educational institutions, including over 148,000 elementary schools. This condition illustrates the intense competition among educational institutions in attracting students. However, many schools still lack strong branding because their public relations management remains administrative and unsystematic. Preliminary interviews conducted at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta revealed that public relations functions are still handled by administrative staff without a dedicated organizational structure or structured annual programs. Public relations activities are also conducted incidentally based on situational needs rather than strategic planning. As a result, communication efforts with parents and communities are not fully optimized. This phenomenon demonstrates a gap between the theoretical importance of public relations management and its actual

implementation within educational institutions, particularly at the Islamic primary education level.

Previous studies consistently demonstrate that public relations management plays a significant role in improving school branding and institutional image. Research conducted by (Desriani & Wahyuni, 2025) and (P et al., 2023) explains that effective communication, school activity publications, and collaboration with communities can strengthen public trust and create positive perceptions toward educational institutions. Similarly, (Sir et al., 2025) found that planned public relations strategies, including the promotion of flagship programs and external partnerships, contribute significantly to improving school image and increasing institutional attractiveness. Furthermore, public relations are not only responsible for disseminating information but also function as communication managers and reputation builders within educational institutions (Fitria & Kristanty, 2026). These studies collectively indicate that public relations management is an essential component in enhancing school competitiveness and maintaining institutional sustainability. Therefore, strengthening public relations management has become increasingly important in supporting educational institutions amid rapid educational transformation and intense competition.

Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of public relations management in strengthening school branding, most of them focus primarily on communication strategies and branding outcomes rather than examining implementation challenges in schools with limited organizational structures. Existing studies generally investigate schools that already possess established public relations systems and adequate human resources. Consequently, limited attention has been given to educational institutions where public relations responsibilities are still merged with administrative duties and lack systematic planning. Moreover, prior research tends to emphasize successful branding practices without critically exploring internal obstacles such as inadequate human resources, unclear organizational structures, and limited communication management. These limitations are particularly relevant in Islamic primary educational institutions, where public relations management is often underdeveloped. Therefore, there is a need for further research that specifically examines how public relations management is implemented within institutions facing structural and managerial limitations, as well as how such implementation contributes to school branding development.

This study offers novelty (state of the art) by focusing on the implementation of public relations management in educational institutions that do not yet possess formal public relations structures. Unlike previous studies that emphasize branding strategies and institutional promotion, this research investigates how public relations functions are carried out adaptively within organizational limitations and limited human resources. Another novelty lies in

the focus on Madrasah Ibtidaiyah as an Islamic primary educational institution with unique organizational and cultural characteristics compared to general schools. This research is important because it provides empirical insights into how educational institutions continue to maintain communication and branding despite limited institutional support. Furthermore, this study contributes theoretically to the development of educational public relations management studies while also providing practical recommendations for strengthening school branding strategies in Islamic educational institutions. Therefore, this research is expected to become a relevant reference for improving sustainable and competitive educational branding practices.

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze and describe the implementation of public relations management in improving school branding at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta. Specifically, this study examines the implementation of public relations functions in schools without dedicated public relations structures, analyzes communication strategies used to build relationships with communities, identifies supporting and inhibiting factors, and explores the contribution of public relations activities to school branding development. This research is based on the argument that school branding is not solely determined by academic excellence but is also influenced by communication quality and institutional relationships with society. Therefore, even in the absence of formal public relations structures, adaptive communication practices may still contribute to institutional image building. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the discourse of educational public relations management and practically to the development of more effective, sustainable, and competitive school branding strategies in Islamic educational institutions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta using a qualitative case study approach. This design was selected because it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of public relations management in improving school branding within its real-life context. A qualitative case study is considered appropriate for exploring social phenomena comprehensively and contextually without manipulating variables. Through this approach, the researcher was able to examine processes, meanings, and experiences related to the implementation of public relations management practices in the madrasah environment.

The research was carried out at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta because the institution demonstrates active public relations management practices in strengthening its school branding and maintaining relationships with the community. In addition, the madrasah was considered relevant to the focus of the study due to its strategic efforts in building a positive institutional image

through collaboration with parents and the surrounding society. The subjects of this study included parties directly involved in the implementation of public relations management, with the principal serving as the key informant. Supporting informants consisted of administrative staff and members of the surrounding community. The informants were selected using purposive sampling by considering individuals who possessed sufficient knowledge and direct involvement in public relations activities, thereby ensuring that the collected data were relevant to the objectives of the study.

Data collection techniques in this research consisted of observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to directly examine activities related to public relations management, including interactions between the school, parents, and the surrounding community. In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal and supporting informants to obtain detailed information regarding the implementation, challenges, and strategies of public relations management in enhancing school branding. Meanwhile, documentation techniques were utilized to support the research findings through the collection of archives, photographs, institutional records, and other relevant documents related to public relations activities.

The data analysis technique employed in this study was an interactive analysis model consisting of data condensation, data display, and data verification. Data condensation was carried out by selecting, simplifying, and organizing the data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation according to the research focus. The reduced data were then presented in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate understanding of the research findings. Furthermore, data verification was conducted continuously throughout the research process by interpreting and confirming the consistency of the findings in order to produce valid and reliable conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of public relations management at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta has not yet been formally structured as an independent organizational unit. The public relations function is still handled concurrently by the administrative staff, causing its implementation to remain more administrative than strategic in nature. This condition indicates that the role of public relations as a manager of public communication and institutional image building has not been carried out optimally. Nevertheless, the madrasah continues to perform the basic functions of public relations as a liaison between the institution and the community, particularly in external communication activities (Ritonga et al., 2022). This finding is consistent with previous studies stating that within educational

institutions, public relations management has a strategic role in building institutional image and public trust, thus requiring structured and professional management practices (Zahra et al., 2020). The absence of a formal public relations structure also demonstrates that communication management within the institution is still implemented conventionally and has not fully adopted a strategic communication approach that is integrated into institutional development planning.

Furthermore, the study found that the implementation of public relations activities at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta has not been supported by a systematic and well-planned work program. Conceptually, effective public relations implementation should be based on careful planning in order to achieve communication objectives effectively and efficiently (Alfi, 2025). However, there is no specific annual planning related to public relations activities, resulting in programs that are incidental and situational according to the immediate needs of the madrasah. Public relations activities are generally conducted only when needed, such as requesting permits for school events involving the surrounding community, organizing religious celebrations, and supporting institutional events. The principal explained that “public relations activities usually follow existing school activities, and there has not yet been a specific program designed annually.” For instance, during National Santri Day celebrations, the madrasah organized a carnival involving the surrounding community as part of its external communication activities. This condition indicates that the implementation of public relations management in the madrasah has not fully fulfilled managerial functions, particularly in the aspects of planning, organizing, and program development (Ariyanti & Prasetyo, 2021). As a result, the continuity and consistency of institutional communication remain limited and highly dependent on situational needs rather than long-term branding objectives.

In terms of strategy, the madrasah has implemented several efforts to establish relationships with parents and the surrounding community (Nadila & Zahro, 2025). One of the strategies involves organizing parent association meetings every two months to provide information regarding students’ academic progress and character development. In addition, the institution has utilized social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok as channels for information dissemination and public communication. Among these platforms, Instagram has become the most actively used medium for sharing content related to school activities, student achievements, religious programs, and institutional branding efforts (Fitriyanti, 2023). The use of social media reflects the madrasah’s awareness of the importance of digital

communication in strengthening institutional visibility and maintaining public engagement in the contemporary educational landscape.

Moreover, the madrasah has introduced a communication service through Google Forms known as "Hallominu," which functions as a two-way communication platform connecting the madrasah with parents, teachers, students, and the wider community. Two-way communication is considered an essential element in building harmonious relationships between educational institutions and stakeholders (Ningsih et al., 2022). Through this platform, users are able to submit criticisms, suggestions, aspirations, and feedback anonymously, thereby ensuring confidentiality and encouraging openness in communication (Pratama, 2025). This program has been implemented for approximately one year and aims to facilitate communication while enabling the institution to continuously improve its weaknesses based on stakeholder input. The existence of Hallominu demonstrates the institution's effort to promote transparency, participation, and responsiveness in communication management. However, despite these efforts, the effectiveness of communication strategies has not yet been fully optimized due to the lack of socialization regarding newly implemented policies, which occasionally results in miscommunication between the school and parents. This indicates that although digital communication tools are available, communication management still requires improvement in terms of consistency, clarity, and stakeholder engagement.

In relation to school branding, MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta possesses several flagship programs that serve as the institution's identity and distinguishing characteristics. These programs include tahsin (improvement of Qur'anic recitation), tahfidz (Qur'an memorization), kitab kuning learning programs that have been implemented for approximately four years, a full-day school system operating from 07.00 a.m. to 04.00 p.m., and Islamic character-building programs aligned with the institution's vision of becoming a Qur'anic, character-oriented, and globally minded madrasah. Previous studies explain that institutional excellence and school achievements are major factors influencing positive public perceptions toward educational branding (Hikmah & Handoko, 2025). Such programs can become important considerations for parents when selecting educational institutions for their children (Syafi'i & Samsudin, 2025). These flagship programs indicate that the madrasah has attempted to establish a distinctive educational identity centered on Islamic values, religious competence, and character development.

However, despite the existence of these superior programs, student enrollment data indicate a decline in the number of new students, decreasing

from 38 students in 2024 to 26 students in 2025. This decline suggests that public interest in the madrasah has not been stable and may reflect the suboptimal implementation of school branding through public relations management. The decrease in enrollment also implies that institutional strengths and flagship programs have not yet been communicated effectively to the broader community. In addition, the madrasah has demonstrated relatively strong achievements in non-academic competitions, particularly through obtaining approximately sixteen awards in the Madrasah Competition Board (PKM) at the Yogyakarta city level. Nevertheless, academic achievements have not yet become a prominent strength of the institution, although efforts to improve academic performance are planned to begin in 2026. This condition reflects an imbalance between institutional potential and branding effectiveness, where existing achievements and programs have not yet fully translated into stronger public trust and enrollment growth.

The findings also reveal that the management of school branding is not carried out entirely by the madrasah itself but also involves a foundation-level team responsible for three educational institutions, namely the Islamic elementary school (MI), Islamic junior high school (MTs), and Islamic senior high school (MA). The foundation team plays roles in promotion, information gathering, and content creation for institutional branding purposes. This collaboration indicates that the madrasah receives external support in managing communication and branding activities. However, the implementation still faces several limitations, including inadequate human resources, limited time allocation, and inconsistency in content management and publication. Limited human resources are frequently identified as one of the main obstacles in optimizing public relations activities within educational institutions (Safari & Hikmah, 2025). Consequently, the dissemination of information and the strengthening of school branding have not yet been conducted consistently and sustainably (Mulyani et al., 2025). The reliance on external support from the foundation also indicates that the madrasah has not yet developed an independent and professional public relations system capable of managing branding activities comprehensively.

In addition, this study identified several supporting and inhibiting factors affecting the implementation of public relations management (Mahfudzah & 'Azah, 2023). Supporting factors include strong cooperation among school administrators, the existence of superior educational programs, and support from the foundation in branding activities. Community participation and support also contribute significantly to the success of public relations

implementation within the madrasah environment (Sari, 2025). Positive relationships with parents and the surrounding community provide social capital that supports institutional development and public trust. On the other hand, inhibiting factors include the absence of a clear public relations organizational structure, limited human resources, ineffective communication management, and challenges in building harmonious relationships with certain members of the surrounding community. In several cases, social problems involving students and local residents became obstacles that required direct communication and familial approaches for resolution (Siregar et al., 2025). These challenges demonstrate that public relations management in educational institutions not only concerns promotional activities but also involves conflict management, social adaptation, and relationship maintenance with diverse stakeholders.

From the evaluation perspective, the madrasah conducts regular evaluation meetings among administrators every two weeks. However, these evaluations are not specifically focused on assessing the performance and effectiveness of public relations activities. As a result, the institution has not yet developed measurable indicators to evaluate the extent to which public relations strategies contribute to improving school branding at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta. Evaluation is an important stage in public relations management because it allows institutions to measure the effectiveness and impact of communication strategies that have been implemented (Ariyanti & Prasetyo, 2021). Furthermore, evaluation serves as the basis for institutional improvement and sustainable program development (Zahroh & Hilmiyati, 2024). The absence of specific evaluation mechanisms for public relations activities indicates that institutional communication management remains reactive rather than evidence-based and strategic.

Theoretically, the findings of this research strengthen the understanding that public relations management plays an essential role in building school branding and public trust within educational institutions. However, this study also demonstrates that public relations practices at the madrasah level may still operate adaptively even without a formal organizational structure. The findings suggest that the success of school branding is not solely determined by the existence of a formal public relations division but is also influenced by the quality of educational programs, institutional communication, stakeholder participation, and the social relationships developed by the madrasah. Nevertheless, the absence of structured management and long-term planning limits the institution's ability to maximize its branding potential in a competitive

educational environment.

Practically, the findings indicate that improving school branding at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta requires stronger public relations management, particularly through establishing a clear organizational structure for public relations, developing systematic and sustainable work programs, improving communication effectiveness, and optimizing the strategic role of public relations in managing institutional image. Strengthening the public relations function is considered one of the important strategies for enhancing the competitiveness of educational institutions amid increasingly intense educational competition (Saputri et al., 2025). In addition, the madrasah needs to improve consistency in digital communication, expand stakeholder engagement, and conduct regular evaluations of branding activities to ensure that institutional strengths and achievements are communicated more effectively to the public.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that public relations management at MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta has not yet functioned fully as a strategic instrument in strengthening school branding, as its implementation remains predominantly administrative and has not been integrated comprehensively into the madrasah management system. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that the madrasah has continued to build relationships with the community through communication activities, parent engagement, digital media utilization, and flagship educational programs. The most important finding of this research is that school branding within educational institutions is not solely determined by the existence of a formal public relations structure, but is also strongly influenced by the quality of educational programs, institutional values, social relationships, and the consistency of communication established with stakeholders. This study provides an important lesson that even though public relations management may operate adaptively in educational institutions with limited organizational structures, sustainable branding requires systematic planning, effective communication strategies, and professional management support. In addition, the research contributes academically to the development of studies on educational public relations management by strengthening the understanding that public relations in madrasahs should not merely function as administrative support, but also as a strategic communication instrument capable of building institutional image, public trust, and competitiveness in the educational sector. The study also enriches the discourse on school branding in Islamic educational institutions, particularly regarding the relationship between communication management, institutional identity, and stakeholder participation.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The research was conducted only in one madrasah, namely MI Nurul Ummah Kotagede Yogyakarta, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational institutions with different organizational characteristics and communication systems. In addition, the study employed a qualitative case study approach that focused primarily on in-depth exploration rather than broader measurement of effectiveness, meaning that the influence of public relations management on school branding could not be quantitatively measured. The research also relied on a limited number of informants, particularly those directly involved in school management, which may not fully represent the perspectives of all stakeholders. Therefore, future research is recommended to examine public relations management implementation in a wider range of educational institutions, including public schools, Islamic boarding schools, and private educational organizations, in order to provide more comprehensive comparisons. Future studies are also expected to incorporate quantitative or mixed-method approaches to measure more objectively the impact of public relations management on school branding, institutional reputation, community trust, and student enrollment growth. Furthermore, future researchers may explore the role of digital communication strategies, social media optimization, and stakeholder engagement models in strengthening the competitiveness of educational institutions in the digital era.

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