



Building an Exemplary School Brand: Strategic Approaches to Enhancing Student Recruitment

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61987/jemr.v5i5.2838>

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Brand Image;
Educational
Marketing; Student
Enrollment

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This study aims to analyze strategies for building a school brand image to attract prospective students in the context of Islamic secondary education. A qualitative case study approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of institutional branding practices. Data were collected through observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The analysis was guided by Keller's Brand Image theory, encompassing the dimensions of strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations. The findings indicate that a positive brand image is developed through consistent academic and non-academic achievements, distinctive religious and character-building programs, qualified teachers, effective use of social media, and support from alumni and the surrounding community. Nevertheless, the institution continues to face challenges, including intense competition among schools, limited effectiveness of digital promotional strategies, insufficient alumni engagement, and persistent public perceptions regarding madrasah education. These findings imply that strengthening strategic branding, expanding digital communication, and fostering sustainable stakeholder collaboration are essential for enhancing institutional competitiveness and increasing prospective students' enrollment interest in an increasingly competitive educational environment.

Article History:

Received: April 2026; Revised: May 2026; Accepted: June 2026

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Putri, R. M., Arohman, W., Nursalimah, Dismawati, Sugimin, Mardalena, & Pratiwi, A. (2026). Building an Exemplary School Brand: Strategic Approaches to Enhancing Student Recruitment. *Journal of Educational Management Research*, 5(5), 5247-5259.

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions play a vital role in improving the quality of human resources by providing equitable and high-quality education that prepares learners to meet the demands of an increasingly dynamic society (Khofsah, 2025; Manshur, 2026; Shoha, 2026). As educational systems continue to evolve, schools are no longer evaluated solely based on academic performance but also on their ability to establish credibility, maintain public trust, and

demonstrate institutional excellence. The intensifying competition among educational institutions has encouraged schools to adopt strategic approaches that strengthen their reputation and differentiate them from competitors (Mashudi et al., 2022). A positive institutional image has become an important intangible asset because it influences how stakeholders perceive educational quality and organizational credibility (Albustomi, 2025; Hikmah, 2026; Rahman, 2026). Parents increasingly consider not only curriculum quality but also school reputation, graduate success, and institutional values before making enrollment decisions. Therefore, building a strong brand image is no longer merely a promotional activity but a strategic necessity that supports institutional sustainability, strengthens public confidence, and enhances schools' ability to attract prospective students in an increasingly competitive educational environment.

The growing diversity of educational institutions, including public schools, private schools, and Islamic secondary schools, has expanded educational choices available to families while simultaneously intensifying competition for student enrollment. Parents are becoming increasingly selective in evaluating schools because they seek institutions capable of providing academic excellence, character development, religious education, and future career opportunities for their children (Adzimah, 2024; Najiburohman, 2025; Holidi, 2026; Nadhifah, 2026). Consequently, educational institutions must continuously improve both service quality and institutional visibility to remain competitive. Public perceptions regarding educational quality are generally shaped by multiple factors, including academic achievements, learning facilities, teacher competence, extracurricular activities, and institutional reputation within the community (Aola & Hanif, 2025). These factors collectively influence parents' confidence when selecting schools for their children. In response to these changing expectations, educational institutions increasingly recognize brand image as a strategic resource capable of enhancing competitiveness and strengthening stakeholder trust (Sari, 2025). A favorable brand image enables schools to communicate their educational values effectively, differentiate themselves from competing institutions, and encourage prospective students to choose the institution with greater confidence.

These competitive dynamics are increasingly evident in Islamic secondary education, where madrasah are expected not only to deliver quality education but also to demonstrate distinctive institutional characteristics that appeal to contemporary society. One Islamic secondary school examined in this study has implemented various initiatives to strengthen its institutional image through academic achievements, non-academic accomplishments, religious programs, character-building activities, and community engagement. These institutional strengths represent valuable assets for establishing a favorable public perception and increasing public confidence in educational quality (Fitriani, 2025;

Kusumawati, 2025, 2026). In addition, the institution has attempted to strengthen its communication strategy through public relations activities, school promotion, dissemination of institutional information, and the utilization of social media to expand its outreach to prospective students and parents (Holidi, 2025; Mohlas, 2025; Syafiih, 2025). Nevertheless, rapid technological developments, changing public expectations, and increasing competition among educational institutions continue to challenge the effectiveness of these branding efforts. If institutional strengths are not communicated strategically, many potential stakeholders may remain unaware of the school's distinctive advantages despite its educational achievements.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that brand image plays a significant role in influencing public trust and students' enrollment decisions. Keller (2013) conceptualizes brand image as a collection of perceptions embedded in stakeholders' memory through various associations related to an organization, product, or institution. In educational settings, these associations influence how prospective students and parents evaluate institutional quality before making enrollment decisions. Empirical studies have shown that a positive school image contributes to stronger public confidence, enhances institutional competitiveness, and increases student recruitment (Wicaksono, 2021; Pps & Öçä, 2020). Other researchers have further emphasized that educational branding is strengthened through effective communication, consistent institutional identity, and strategic promotional activities that highlight school achievements and educational services (Fradito et al., 2020; Maulana et al., 2025). Although these studies have provided valuable insights into educational branding, they predominantly examine brand image as an outcome of marketing activities or public perception, offering limited explanation of how schools strategically integrate multiple branding dimensions into a sustainable institutional development process.

Furthermore, previous research has primarily focused on identifying factors that influence institutional image or examining the effectiveness of promotional media without comprehensively explaining how the three dimensions of Keller's Brand Image theory—strength of brand associations, favorability of brand associations, and uniqueness of brand associations—interact in shaping a school's attractiveness to prospective students. Existing studies also tend to emphasize quantitative relationships between institutional reputation and enrollment decisions while paying less attention to the strategic processes undertaken by educational institutions to construct, communicate, and sustain their brand identity over time. Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how Islamic secondary schools strategically develop brand image through the integration of academic excellence, religious values, stakeholder engagement, and digital communication. Addressing this gap is important because educational institutions increasingly operate within highly

competitive environments where long-term sustainability depends not only on educational quality but also on the successful communication of institutional values and distinctive characteristics.

This study addresses these limitations by offering a comprehensive analysis of school brand image development using Keller's Brand Image framework as an analytical lens. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine branding outcomes or promotional effectiveness, this research explores the strategic processes through which institutional image is developed, communicated, and maintained by integrating academic achievements, non-academic accomplishments, religious programs, educator quality, social media utilization, alumni participation, and community support. The study also examines the challenges encountered in sustaining institutional branding, including increasing competition among educational institutions, limitations in digital promotion, insufficient alumni engagement, and persistent public perceptions regarding Islamic secondary education. By incorporating these interconnected factors within a qualitative case study, this research provides a more holistic understanding of educational branding strategies and extends the application of Keller's theory within the context of Islamic secondary education, thereby contributing both theoretically and practically to educational management and marketing literature.

Based on these considerations, this study investigates how an Islamic secondary school develops its brand image to attract prospective students through the dimensions proposed by Keller's Brand Image theory. Specifically, the study seeks to analyze how the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations are strategically constructed and communicated to build public trust and enhance institutional competitiveness. It argues that a strong and sustainable school brand image is not determined solely by educational quality but also by the institution's ability to transform its academic excellence, religious identity, stakeholder collaboration, and communication strategies into meaningful associations that positively influence public perception. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on educational branding by providing empirical evidence regarding strategic brand image development in Islamic secondary education while offering practical recommendations for educational leaders seeking to strengthen institutional competitiveness and increase prospective student enrollment in an increasingly competitive educational landscape.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method using a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the strategies used to build a school brand image and attract prospective students (Salmona and Kaczynski, 2024; Takona, 2024). A qualitative case study was considered appropriate

because it enables researchers to explore complex social phenomena within their real-life context while capturing the perspectives and experiences of multiple stakeholders. Rather than measuring relationships among variables, this approach emphasizes understanding the processes, interactions, and meanings underlying institutional branding practices. The research was conducted at MAN X Merangin because the madrasah has consistently implemented various branding initiatives through academic excellence, religious programs, public relations activities, and digital communication, making it an appropriate case for examining how educational institutions strategically develop and maintain a positive public image amid increasing competition among secondary schools.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis (Miles, Huberman, et al., 2013). Observation was conducted to examine the implementation of branding activities, institutional programs, and interactions among school stakeholders in their natural setting. Semi-structured interviews involved the principal, vice principal for public relations, teachers, students, and parents who were purposively selected based on their knowledge and direct involvement in school branding activities. Document analysis included institutional reports, promotional materials, achievement records, school profiles, and social media content to provide supporting evidence and strengthen the credibility of the findings. The integration of these multiple data sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of how the institution develops and communicates its brand image to prospective students and the wider community.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, et al. (2013), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, coding, and organizing information relevant to the research objectives. Subsequently, the condensed data were systematically presented through descriptive narratives and thematic categories to facilitate interpretation and identify relationships among emerging findings. The final stage involved continuously verifying interpretations and drawing conclusions throughout the research process to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the collected data. The analysis was guided by Keller's Brand Image theory, particularly the dimensions of strength of brand associations, favorability of brand associations, and uniqueness of brand associations, to examine the strategies employed in building the institution's brand image. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data validity was established through source triangulation and technique triangulation by comparing information obtained from different participants and multiple data collection methods, thereby enhancing the

credibility, consistency, and confirmability of the research results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Strength of Brand Association

The findings reveal that the strength of the school's brand association is reflected in its ability to communicate institutional excellence through various academic and non-academic achievements. Students have consistently participated in and won competitions at regional and provincial levels, contributing to the school's positive reputation among the community. These achievements serve as tangible evidence of educational quality and become one of the primary considerations for parents when selecting a school for their children. The visibility of these accomplishments has gradually strengthened public recognition of the institution as a competitive Islamic secondary school.

Another important finding concerns the role of educational programs in strengthening the school's image. The institution implements various religious and character-building activities, including Qur'an memorization programs, Islamic holiday commemorations, congregational worship, and daily religious guidance. These programs are integrated with academic learning, creating a balanced educational environment that emphasizes both intellectual development and moral values. Such integration has become one of the school's strongest institutional characteristics and contributes significantly to its positive public image.

The study also found that institutional communication plays an important role in strengthening brand associations. The school disseminates information through social media platforms, official publications, school events, and direct interaction with the surrounding community. Teachers and school leaders actively participate in promotional activities by introducing school programs and achievements to prospective students and parents. Nevertheless, the dissemination of information has not yet been implemented consistently, resulting in several institutional strengths remaining insufficiently recognized by the wider public.

Favorability of Brand Association

The findings indicate that positive public perceptions of the school are primarily formed through the quality of educational services provided. Parents and students perceive the institution as offering an educational environment that combines academic excellence with religious values. This perception is

reinforced by the commitment of school leaders and teachers to maintaining educational quality through effective learning processes, student guidance, and continuous academic improvement. Consequently, the school has gained increasing trust from the surrounding community.

Teacher competence also emerged as a major factor contributing to favorable brand associations. Informants emphasized that teachers demonstrate strong professional competence, provide effective classroom instruction, and actively support students' academic and personal development. Beyond teaching responsibilities, educators also function as mentors who encourage student participation in academic competitions, extracurricular activities, and character-building programs. These roles strengthen stakeholders' confidence in the institution's ability to provide high-quality educational services.

In addition, community support has contributed positively to the school's institutional image. Parents appreciate the school's efforts to maintain communication regarding educational activities and student development, while students express satisfaction with the learning environment and available educational opportunities. The increasing interest of prospective students each academic year further reflects the favorable perception that has developed within the community. Overall, these findings demonstrate that educational quality, teacher professionalism, and stakeholder trust collectively reinforce positive brand associations.

Uniqueness of Brand Association

The study found that the school's uniqueness is primarily reflected in its successful integration of general education with Islamic values. Unlike many other secondary schools, the institution provides educational experiences that combine national curriculum requirements with intensive religious instruction and character education. This balanced educational model creates a distinctive institutional identity that differentiates the school from competing educational institutions within the region.

Another distinctive characteristic is the implementation of various flagship religious programs that have become integral parts of daily school life. Regular Qur'an memorization activities, Islamic character development, religious celebrations, and spiritual guidance programs create a learning culture that emphasizes both academic achievement and moral development. These activities not only strengthen students' religious identity but also become important institutional characteristics recognized by parents and the wider community when evaluating the school's quality.

Despite these distinctive advantages, the findings also reveal several challenges affecting the sustainability of the school's brand uniqueness. Competition with other educational institutions has intensified, requiring continuous innovation in educational programs and institutional promotion. Furthermore, digital communication has not been fully optimized, resulting in inconsistent dissemination of information regarding flagship programs and institutional achievements. Public perceptions that associate madrasahs primarily with religious education also remain a challenge, highlighting the need for more effective communication strategies to demonstrate the school's balanced excellence in academic, non-academic, and religious development.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the school has successfully developed a positive brand image through academic and non-academic achievements, religious programs, teacher competence, and institutional communication. These findings are consistent with Keller's (2016) proposition that brand image is constructed through associations that shape stakeholders' perceptions of an institution. In the educational context, the school's achievements and educational quality function as strong brand associations that strengthen institutional credibility and public trust. This finding is also in line with previous studies suggesting that a positive institutional image significantly influences parents' and prospective students' decisions when selecting educational institutions (Nirmala et al., 2025). Likewise, the emphasis on educational quality, teacher professionalism, and effective communication supports the argument that branding in education extends beyond promotional activities and must be rooted in the quality of educational services delivered to stakeholders (Nadilla et al., 2025). Therefore, the present study reinforces the view that institutional branding is a multidimensional process in which educational performance and communication strategies operate simultaneously to strengthen public confidence.

The analysis based on the strength of brand association indicates that academic excellence, student achievements, religious activities, and institutional communication collectively reinforce the school's image in the public mind. These findings support Keller's theoretical perspective that strong brand associations emerge when stakeholders repeatedly receive consistent and meaningful information regarding an institution's strengths (Keller, 2016). The results are also consistent with the findings of Muhfahroyin et al. (2022), who argue that a strong institutional image positively influences public trust and

student enrollment decisions. However, unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize promotional activities as the foundation of branding, this study reveals that institutional achievements and educational quality constitute the primary sources of brand strength, while promotional media merely function as channels for communicating these strengths. This finding extends previous literature by highlighting that communication strategies become effective only when they are supported by authentic institutional performance rather than relying solely on promotional campaigns.

Regarding the favorability of brand association, the findings reveal that positive public perceptions are developed through the integration of academic excellence, religious education, qualified teachers, and supportive educational services. These results are consistent with the argument that favorable brand associations emerge when stakeholders perceive that an institution provides meaningful educational benefits and consistently delivers quality services (Iqomah & Dewi, 2025). The findings further support previous studies emphasizing that teacher competence and educational quality are central determinants of institutional reputation (Nadilla et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this study contributes additional insight by demonstrating that positive perceptions are not shaped exclusively by academic performance but also by the successful integration of religious values and character education into the learning process. Theoretically, this finding broadens the application of Keller's Brand Image framework within Islamic secondary education by illustrating that educational values and religious identity represent important sources of favorable brand associations that complement traditional indicators of institutional quality.

The findings concerning the uniqueness of brand association indicate that the integration of general education with Islamic values constitutes the institution's most distinctive competitive advantage. This finding supports Keller's (2016) assertion that uniqueness represents the fundamental element distinguishing one organization from its competitors. The integration of academic learning, Qur'an memorization, religious activities, and character-building programs creates a unique institutional identity that is difficult for competing schools to replicate. Nevertheless, the study also identifies several challenges, including increasing competition among educational institutions, suboptimal digital promotion, and persistent public perceptions that associate madrasahs primarily with religious education. These findings differ from several previous studies that mainly discuss institutional uniqueness from the perspective of educational programs alone (Saputri & Sudhana, 2024). Instead, the present research demonstrates that maintaining uniqueness also depends on

an institution's capacity to communicate its distinctive characteristics consistently through digital platforms, stakeholder engagement, and strategic public relations. Consequently, uniqueness should be understood as both an organizational characteristic and a communication strategy that continuously reinforces institutional differentiation.

Overall, this study makes important theoretical and practical contributions to the literature on educational branding. Theoretically, it extends Keller's Brand Image theory by demonstrating that the dimensions of strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations are interrelated and collectively explain how Islamic secondary schools establish sustainable institutional competitiveness. The findings also enrich educational management literature by illustrating that brand image is formed through the interaction between educational quality, stakeholder relationships, and strategic communication rather than through promotional activities alone. Practically, the study provides recommendations for school leaders to strengthen institutional branding by optimizing digital communication, systematically publishing academic and non-academic achievements, expanding alumni involvement, and fostering stronger collaboration with parents and the surrounding community. Implementing these strategies is expected to enhance institutional visibility, strengthen stakeholder trust, and increase prospective student enrollment while enabling educational institutions to maintain long-term competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic educational environment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that developing a strong school brand image is not merely the result of promotional activities but rather the outcome of the strategic integration of educational quality, religious values, stakeholder engagement, and effective institutional communication. The study reveals that academic and non-academic achievements, qualified teachers, distinctive religious programs, and the utilization of communication media constitute the primary factors that strengthen the school's brand image and enhance prospective students' enrollment interest. These findings provide an important insight that sustainable educational branding should be built upon authentic institutional excellence supported by consistent communication strategies. Theoretically, this study contributes to the educational management and marketing literature by extending the application of Keller's Brand Image theory within the context of Islamic secondary education, demonstrating how the dimensions of strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations

interact to create institutional competitiveness. Despite these contributions, this research is limited to a single-case study, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings to other educational contexts. Future research is therefore encouraged to employ multiple-case studies or mixed-methods approaches across diverse educational institutions to examine the dynamics of school branding in different organizational and socio-cultural settings while incorporating additional variables, such as digital marketing effectiveness, alumni engagement, and stakeholder satisfaction.

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