



Branding Strategies for Islamic Educational Institutions in Improving the Competitiveness of Madrasahs

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Abstract: The purpose of writing this article is: (1) to find out how the branding strategy is implemented at MIN 1 Jombang, and (2) to find out what the branding strategy is at MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang. This research method uses a qualitative approach with a case study type of research. Data collection was carried out using interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis techniques using data reduction stages, data presentation, and concluding/ data verification. The validity of the data was established using triangulation techniques. The results of research on the branding strategy of Islamic educational institutions in increasing competitiveness are as follows: 1) The branding strategy at MIN 1 Jombang is carried out in several ways as follows: (a) Madrasah Accreditation Score, (b) Madrasah superior programs (Digital Madrasah, Religion, Literacy, Child Friendly, and Adiwiyata), (c) Madrasah achievements in academic and non-academic, and (d) Extra Curricular Robotics; 2) The branding strategy at MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang is carried out in the following way: (a) Madrasah Accreditation Score, (b) At Tartil method superior program, (c) Madrasah achievements in academic and non-academic fields.

Keywords: branding strategy, Islamic educational institutions, madrasah competitiveness, flagship programs.

Abstrak: Tujuan penulisan artikel ini adalah: (1) untuk mengetahui bagaimana pelaksanaan strategi branding yang ada di MIN 1 Jombang, dan (2) untuk mengetahui bagaimana strategi branding yang ada di MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang. Metode penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian studi kasus. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan menggunakan wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Teknik analisis data dengan menggunakan tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data serta penarikan kesimpulan/verifikasi data. Adapun keabsahan data dilakukan dengan menggunakan teknik triangulasi. Hasil penelitian tentang strategi branding lembaga pendidikan Islam dalam meningkatkan daya saing adalah sebagai berikut: 1) Strategi branding di MIN 1 Jombang dilakukan dengan beberapa cara sebagai berikut: (a) Nilai Akreditasi madrasah, (b) Program unggulan madrasah (Madrasah Digital, Religi, Literasi, Ramah Anak, dan Adiwiyata), (c) Prestasi madrasah dalam akademik dan non akademik, dan (d) Ekstra Kurikuler Robotik; 2) Strategi branding di MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang dilakukan dengan dengan cara sebagai berikut: (a) Nilai Akreditasi madrasah, (b) Program unggulan metode At Tartil, (c) Prestasi madrasah dalam bidang akademik dan non akademik.

Kata kunci : strategi branding, lembaga pendidikan Islam, daya saing madrasah, program unggulan.

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Introduction

Competition among Islamic educational institutions, particularly madrasahs, is intensifying as the number of educational institutions increases and parents become more aware of the importance of choosing the right school for their children (Arif et al., 2025; Ayumi & Nasution, 2025). In this context, madrasahs are no longer judged solely on their institutional existence or fulfillment of administrative standards, but rather on their ability to build public trust through clear, relevant, and sustainable excellence. Changes in parental preferences indicate that the competitiveness of madrasahs is determined by how well the institutions are able to consistently communicate their values, service quality, and graduate characteristics to the community (Kholik et al., 2024; Masrufa et al., 2023). This awareness has encouraged Islamic educational institutions to develop strategies that are not only oriented towards internal quality improvement, but also towards managing their image and institutional identity. It is in this context that branding has become a strategic instrument for madrasahs to assert their differentiation, build positive perceptions, and strengthen their competitive position amid the increasingly complex dynamics of educational competition.

People's preference in choosing a product or service is based on their awareness of the brand. The same applies to educational institutions. The initial stage of deciding on a school is based on awareness of the school's brand. People will not choose a school that they do not remember or know. Therefore, it is important for schools to have a brand so that they can be easily recognized and remembered by the public. (Juhaidi, 2022). One way to maintain the existence of educational institutions is through branding. Branding madrasahs is an effort made by educational institutions to raise their profile. Through the prominence of a madrasah's name, it is hoped that its image in the eyes of the community will improve, thereby attracting the community to choose the educational institution for their children's schooling. In order to increase the attractiveness of the community through school branding, educational institutions must also improve the quality of their output, so that the community will place their trust in them, and the existence of the educational institution can be guaranteed. (Mustika, 2020)

Branding is carried out as an effort to introduce and differentiate a product from other competitors' products, which can build a distinctive characteristic of the product. With the development of the marketing world, branding strategies are now widely used by businesspeople in both the product and service sectors (Afrilia, 2018). School branding is the identity of an educational institution that becomes its distinctive feature through its character, uniqueness, and excellence based on the opportunities and potential of the environment, as well as the support of all school/madrasah members and parents. School branding can attract the community to choose a

particular educational institution (Mujib & Saptiningsih, 2021). To increase appeal and interest, this branding strategy is something that must be considered.

According to (E. Budiarti, 2023; E. M. Budiarti, 2018; I. Budiarti et al., 2023) the benefits of school branding include: a) as a means of publicity and also public attraction, b) building image, trust, quality assurance, and prestige, c) increasing public trust (market control), d) increasing public interest and awareness, e) improving service quality, and f) improving student behavior for the better. In addition, branding carried out in schools aims to shape public perception and build public trust in the brand. (Jamaluddin, 2020a, 2020b; Mustika, 2020)

The purpose of a school branding strategy is to increase the attractiveness and trustworthiness of the school, increase the number of new student enrollments, retain existing students, and enhance the school's reputation and credibility (Mujib & Saptiningsih, 2021). According to Kusri (2021), branding strategies can be integrated through teaching practices, such as using unique teaching methods, attractive school uniforms, or establishing school and cultural traditions. In addition, branding strategies can also be communicated through jargon/slogans, vision and mission statements, and school logos that can be posted on social media, the school's official website, and print media such as posters, banners, brochures, school calendars, and other publications.

Several studies related to branding have been conducted by researchers, some of which reveal that management strategies in strengthening school branding are carried out by improving school quality (Nurabadi, 2018), strengthening brand character to make it more appealing to consumers (E. M. Budiarti, 2018; I. Budiarti et al., 2023), assigning public relations to promote and publish the school's excellence in various media and communicate and socialize directly with the public, and branding by strengthening the school's characteristics (Fachri et al., 2019), forming a brand image to increase school competitiveness (Nurabadi, 2018), and building school branding by involving branding reinforcement factors (Ismail, 2013). All of these studies have not comprehensively revealed the efforts or strategies in improving madrasah branding as an effort to face the competitiveness of educational institutions.

A number of previous studies have examined school or madrasah branding from various perspectives. (Mustika, 2020; Nurabadi, 2018) for example, emphasize that branding is strengthened through improving service quality and institutional performance, but their studies tend to place branding as a consequence of managerial quality without elaborating in detail on the strategic process of forming institutional identity. Other studies by (E. M. Budiarti, 2018; I. Budiarti et al., 2023) and (Mundiri, 2016b, 2016a) focus on strengthening the character and image of schools as an effort to increase public trust, but they are still normative and do not specifically relate branding to the social context and resource capacity of the institution.

Research highlighting the role of public relations and media in school branding (Fachri et al., 2019; Jamaluddin, 2020a) contributes to the aspects of communication and publication, but tends to view branding as merely an external promotional activity. This approach fails to explore how branding is built internally through the integration of vision, flagship programs, and daily institutional practices. Furthermore, most of these studies use a single case study design, thus providing little room for comparative analysis between different branding models.

Based on this critical review, there is a significant research gap regarding the understanding of madrasah branding as a contextual and adaptive strategy. Previous studies have not adequately compared how madrasahs with different resource characteristics develop effective branding strategies in line with the needs and expectations of the community. Therefore, this study offers a new contribution through a multi-site approach by comparing two madrasah branding models: focused branding based on a single, strongly internalized flagship program, and differentiated branding based on program diversification integrated with the institution's vision. Thus, this study not only presents different study locations but also provides a conceptual understanding of the variations in madrasah branding strategies and their implications for the competitiveness of Islamic educational institutions.

It is an undeniable fact that educational institutions in Indonesia have historically experienced ups and downs and changes, both in terms of their institutional structure, education system, and operations. Some schools have indeed undergone various changes and modernization. However, several other schools have limited their capabilities because they are constrained by their vision and eventually closed down because they were abandoned by prospective students and parents (Mujib & Saptiningsih, 2021). Another fact is that in the current era, schools that can survive are not necessarily large and magnificent. In fact, many schools have closed, lost students, been merged, and disappeared. However, schools that can survive are those that can read future trends and adapt to various situations. (Mujib & Saptiningsih, 2021)

MIN 1 Jombang and MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang are two of many public and private madrasahs in Jombang Regency. In recent years, both madrasahs have earned the trust of the community as preferred choices for their children's education. This is because both madrasahs can compete with various other madrasahs and leading schools in Jombang Regency.

In light of the above context, every educational institution needs to implement a branding strategy to improve quality and attractiveness to the community. A branding strategy is necessary due to the fierce competition among educational institutions to win the hearts of the community/parents. Schools need to label themselves with a brand as a means of supporting and increasing community interest, especially among parents. This is because a successful brand becomes a leader (measured in terms of market share) and categorizes its products in the relevant market (domestic/global).

Therefore, to become a school institution that is in demand by the wider community, it is necessary to develop a brand strategy that can attract the public. One example of a well-known brand in Indonesia in the world of education is Entrepreneur. Based on this context, the researcher wanted to look further into the branding strategies implemented by MIN 1 Jombang and MIS Mujahidin Parimono Jombang in increasing the competitiveness of madrasahs.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of madrasah branding strategies as contextual social and managerial practices. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of the meaning, processes, and dynamics of branding that are constructed through actor interactions and institutional policies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). The selection of research locations was conducted purposively based on the following criteria: the madrasah has a good reputation in the community, shows stability or an increase in the number of students, and has an excellent program that is explicitly positioned as an institutional identity. Based on these criteria, MIN 1 Jombang and MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang were selected as two cases representing diversificative and focused branding strategies. Research informants were determined purposively and included the madrasah principal, vice principal, teachers, and flagship program managers, with a total of 14 key informants who were assessed as information-rich (Patton, 2015).

Data collection was conducted over a period of approximately four months through semi-structured in-depth interviews, limited observation of madrasah activities and environments, and analysis of institutional documents such as vision and mission statements, work programs, performance reports, and promotional media. These three techniques were combined to obtain a comprehensive understanding and enable data triangulation (Bowen, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009)

Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis was conducted on each site first (within-case analysis), then continued with cross-case analysis to build a comparative understanding. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking, while research ethics were addressed through informant consent, data confidentiality, and researcher reflexivity in the interpretation process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Result and Discussion

Result

Branding Strategy at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Negeri 1 Jombang

The results of the study show that the branding strategy at MIN 1 Jombang is carried out through several key aspects that are consistently communicated to the public.

a. Madrasah Accreditation Score

Official madrasah documentation shows that MIN 1 Jombang has a good accreditation rating, and this status is openly displayed in the madrasah profile, new student admission brochures, and online media. An informant from the leadership stated: *"We always convey the accreditation status to parents because it is an initial indicator of public trust in the quality of the madrasah."* Observations of the madrasah's information media show that the accreditation score is listed on the information board and the madrasah's official website as part of the institution's image.

b. Madrasah Flagship Programs

MIN 1 Jombang has developed several flagship programs that have become the identity of the institution, including Digital Madrasah, Religious Madrasah, Literacy Madrasah, Child-Friendly Madrasah, and Adiwiyata Madrasah. Field observations show the use of technological devices such as LCDs and digital whiteboards in the learning process, as well as the use of a digital-based administration system. One teacher said, *"In our daily teaching, we are accustomed to using digital media, both for teaching materials and evaluation."*

In terms of the Religious Madrasah, interview data shows that Al-Qur'an learning using the Ummi method is carried out in a scheduled and tiered manner. A program manager stated: *"The Ummi program has become part of the curriculum and is carried out every day according to schedule."* Documentation of the Ummi curriculum and guidebook reinforces this finding. The Literacy, Child-Friendly, and Adiwiyata Madrasah programs are supported by observations of morning literacy activities, the existence of reading corners, environmental cleanliness and greening management, and educational posters in the madrasah environment. Documentation in the form of activity schedules and program reports shows the continuity of these programs.

c. Academic and Non-Academic Achievements

Madrasah documentation shows various academic and non-academic achievements attained by students in local and regional competitions. One informant stated, *"We always document and publish every student achievement so that the community is aware of the madrasah's accomplishments."* Observations of the madrasah's achievement board and social media posts reinforce this finding.

d. Robotics Extracurricular Activity

The robotics extracurricular activity is one of the distinctive features of MIN 1 Jombang in supporting the image of a technology-based madrasah. Observations show

that there are regular robotics activities with supporting facilities and guidance from supervising teachers. A supervisor of the activity said, *“Robotics is a unique attraction because not all madrasahs have this activity.”* Documentation in the form of activity schedules and photo archives supports the existence and continuity of the robotics extracurricular activity.

Branding Strategy at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mujahidin Parimono Jombang

The results of the study indicate that the branding strategy at MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang is carried out in a more focused manner through several key aspects:

a. Madrasah Accreditation Scores

Official documentation shows that MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang includes accreditation scores in its madrasah profile, brochures, and information media. One informant said, *“Parents usually ask about accreditation before enrolling their children.”* Observations of socialization activities and new student admissions show that accreditation information is always conveyed to parents.

b. At-Tartil Method Flagship Program

The main flagship program of MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang is Al-Qur'an learning using the At-Tartil method. Data from interviews with the head of the madrasah shows that this method is implemented in a structured manner and has become the identity of the institution. A Qur'an teacher stated, *“At-Tartil is a hallmark of our madrasah and is consistently applied in all classes.”* Classroom observations showed the use of At-Tartil modules and learning practices that focused on reading accuracy. Documentation of the madrasah's curriculum and promotional materials reinforced these findings.

c. Academic and Non-Academic Achievements

Documentation shows that MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang has academic and non-academic achievements that are published through social media and madrasah activities. An informant stated: *“We use our students' achievements as information for the community so that they are aware of the madrasah's progress.”* Observations of social media posts and madrasah activity reports support this finding.

Discussion

Madrasah Branding Strategy from A Theoretical Perspective

The literature on educational branding emphasizes that branding educational institutions is not merely a promotional activity, but rather a strategic process to build identity, differentiation, and public trust (Chapleo, 2015; Hemsley-Brown, 2015; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) In the context of Islamic education, branding is also related to the integration of religious values, academic quality, and social expectations of the community. (Kertajaya & Sula, 2006; Saeed et al., 2019)

The findings show that the branding strategies of both madrasahs are not only based on symbols or slogans, but are also manifested through concrete institutional

practices, such as accreditation, flagship programs, and student achievements. This is in line with (Chapleo, 2015; Chapleo et al., 2011) findings, which emphasize that the success of educational branding is largely determined by the consistency between the communicated identity and the organizational practices carried out.

Diversified Branding Strategy

MIN 1 Jombang implements a diversified branding strategy through the development of various flagship programs (Digital Madrasah, Religious, Literacy, Child-Friendly, and Adiwiyata), coupled with highlighting achievements and robotics extracurricular activities. This strategy can be understood through the brand portfolio framework in organizational branding literature, where institutions develop several value attributes to reach a broader market segment (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013)

In the context of education, this approach is in line with the findings of Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) who state that large or public educational institutions tend to adopt multi-attribute branding to respond to the diversity of parental preferences. However, the literature also warns that diversificative branding carries the risk of identity fragmentation if not managed in an integrated manner (Chapleo, 2015). Empirical findings at MIN 1 Jombang show that there is a high demand for managerial coordination to maintain consistency in branding messages amid the many flagship programs.

Focused Branding

Unlike MIN 1 Jombang, MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang implements a focused branding strategy by making the At-Tartil method of learning the Qur'an the main identity of the madrasah. This strategy reflects the concept of brand specialization or brand focus, in which organizations build strong differentiation through one consistent core value. (Chapleo, 2015; Keller, 2013)

In the context of Islamic education, this finding is in line with the research by (Saeed et al., 2019) and (Trifauzi et al., 2021), which shows that differentiation based on religious excellence can increase the attractiveness of Islamic educational institutions amid competition. However, the literature also notes that focus strategies are highly dependent on the quality of implementation and the sustainability of human resources (Aaker, 1996, 2004). The findings of this study indicate that the success of MI Mujahidin's branding is closely related to the competence of Al-Qur'an teachers and the consistent application of the At-Tartil method.

Comparative Analysis and Nuances of Findings

A comparison of the two cases shows that the effectiveness of a branding strategy is not determined by the number of flagship programs, but rather by the alignment between the branding strategy, institutional capacity, and the local education market context. Diversified branding at MIN 1 Jombang provides flexibility and a wider market reach, but requires complex management. Conversely, focused branding at MI

Mujahidin offers strong and recognizable differentiation, but carries the risk of dependence on a single core program.

These findings expand the literature on Islamic education branding, which has tended to be normative, emphasizing the importance of flagship programs without distinguishing the strategic implications of diversification and focus. This study shows that each strategy has organizational consequences in terms of management, teacher workload, and branding sustainability.

To clarify the results of the comparative analysis and capture the nuances of cross-site findings, the following table presents a systematic comparison of the branding strategies implemented by MIN 1 Jombang and MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang. Table 1 not only summarizes the differences in the form and focus of branding strategies but also shows the institutional and managerial implications of each approach, thus serving as an analytical basis for theoretical reading and further discussion.

Table 1. Comparison of Branding Strategies between MIN 1 Jombang and MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang

Comparative Aspects	MIN 1 Jombang	MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang
Institutional Status	Public madrasahs are supported by government regulations and resources	Community-based private madrasahs
Accreditation Value	Accreditation is presented as an indicator of quality and institutional legitimacy	Accreditation is presented as a guarantee of quality for parents
Branding Strategy Patterns	Diversified branding (multiple flagship programs)	Focused branding (one core program)
Featured Programs	Digital Madrasah, Religious Madrasah (Ummi), Literacy, Child-Friendly, Adiwiyata	Al-Qur'an learning using the At-Tartil method
Key Differentiations	Diverse programs and innovative educational services	Strong specialization in Al-Qur'an competencies
Academic & Non-Academic Achievements	Various academic and non-academic achievements are widely publicized	Academic and non-academic achievements strengthen the institution's image
Unique Extracurricular Activities	Robotics extracurricular activities as a symbol of technology-based madrasahs	There are no unique extracurricular activities

Media Branding	Social media, madrasah information boards, PPDB brochures, public activities	Social media, PPDB brochures, PAUD/RA networks
Strategic Strengths	Reaching a broad and diverse market segment	Clear differentiation and easy recognition by the public
Strategic Challenges	Risk of identity fragmentation and program management complexity	High dependence on human resource quality and one core program
Managerial Implications	Requires coordination and consistency across programs	Requires quality control and sustainability of the At-Tartil method

Theoretically, the comparisons in this table can be interpreted through the framework of brand identity and brand equity. MIN 1 Jombang's strategy reflects the brand portfolio and brand associations approach (Aaker), in which the institution builds brand equity through a diversity of attributes and flagship programs. From Keller's perspective, this approach expands brand salience and brand imagery so that the madrasah is easily recognizable by various segments of parents. Conversely, MI Mujahidin Parimono demonstrates a focused branding strategy in line with Chapleo, namely the differentiation of educational brands through consistent specialization. This synthesis confirms that madrasah branding lies on a spectrum between diversification and focus, with effectiveness largely determined by the institutional context and community expectations.

Theoretical Contributions and Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes by offering a conceptual typology of madrasah branding strategies, namely diversificative branding and focused branding, in the context of Islamic education. These findings not only confirm organizational branding theory but also expand it by showing how religious values, institutional status, and resource capacity influence branding strategy choices. In practical terms, madrasah administrators need to tailor their branding strategies to the characteristics of their institutions and the needs of their communities, while also considering the long-term consequences of their chosen strategies. Thus, this discussion emphasizes that madrasah branding is a contextual strategic practice, rather than a universal approach that can be applied uniformly.

Conclusion

This study found that the competitiveness of madrasahs is not solely determined by the completeness of facilities or the intensity of promotion, but rather by the clarity and consistency of branding strategies based on institutional excellence. An important

finding that emerged after the research was conducted showed that MI Mujahidin Parimono Jombang was able to maintain public trust and interest through a focused and internalized flagship program, namely Al-Qur'an learning using the At-Tartil method, despite having more limited resources. Conversely, MIN 1 Jombang built its branding through the diversification of flagship programs integrated with the madrasah's vision. This confirms that both focused and diversified branding approaches can be equally effective if managed consistently.

Scientifically, this study confirms previous findings regarding the strategic role of branding in increasing the competitiveness of Islamic educational institutions, while also contributing a new perspective on the variety of madrasah branding models. These findings enrich the study of educational branding by showing that the effectiveness of branding does not depend on the uniformity of strategy, but rather on the suitability between the character of the institution, resource capacity, and community needs. Thus, this study provides a conceptual contribution in the form of an understanding that madrasah branding strategies are contextual and adaptive.

This study has limitations in terms of the number and types of cases studied, namely covering only two madrasahs at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah level and limited to one region. In addition, the qualitative approach used did not measure the impact of branding quantitatively. Therefore, further research needs to involve more diverse cases, different levels of education, a wider region, and a mixed-method approach in order to produce more in-depth and comprehensive findings as a basis for formulating more effective madrasah branding policies.

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