



School Principal's Strategy In Improving School Branding

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Abstract: This study is motivated by the growing importance of school branding as a strategic approach to strengthening public trust amid increasing competition among educational institutions. Nevertheless, many public schools in semi-rural areas continue to struggle to develop a strong institutional image because branding is often perceived as seasonal promotional activities rather than a long-term strategic process. This study aims to analyze the principal's strategies for strengthening school branding at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar, identify supporting and inhibiting factors, and formulate an appropriate branding model for public schools in semi-rural contexts. A qualitative case study approach was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving the principal, vice principals, teachers, public relations personnel, and parents. Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, supported by triangulation and member checking to ensure credibility. The findings reveal that school branding is strengthened through teacher professionalism, religious and character-based school culture, optimization of visual identity, intensive use of digital media, and the principal's relational engagement with the local community. These integrated strategies successfully enhanced public trust, reflected in the significant increase in student enrollment during the 2025/2026 academic year. The novelty of this study lies in proposing a hybrid school branding model that integrates local social capital, adaptive leadership, school culture, and digital communication to improve the competitiveness of public schools in semi-rural areas through a sustainable and community-oriented approach.

Keywords: school branding; principal leadership; school culture; digital communication; strategic educational management.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh semakin pentingnya school branding sebagai strategi meningkatkan kepercayaan masyarakat di tengah persaingan antarlembaga pendidikan. Namun, banyak sekolah negeri di daerah masih menghadapi keterbatasan dalam membangun citra institusi yang kuat karena branding sering dipahami sebatas kegiatan promosi musiman. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis strategi kepala sekolah dalam memperkuat school branding di UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar, mengidentifikasi faktor pendukung dan penghambat, serta merumuskan model branding yang sesuai bagi sekolah negeri di wilayah semi-perdesaan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi terhadap kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah, guru, humas, dan orang tua siswa. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña melalui reduksi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan kesimpulan yang divalidasi dengan triangulasi dan member checking. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi branding

dibangun melalui penguatan profesionalisme guru, pembiasaan budaya religius dan karakter, optimalisasi identitas visual sekolah, pemanfaatan media digital, serta pendekatan relasional kepala sekolah kepada masyarakat. Implementasi strategi tersebut meningkatkan kepercayaan masyarakat yang ditandai dengan meningkatnya jumlah peserta didik baru pada tahun ajaran 2025/2026. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada formulasi model hybrid school branding yang mengintegrasikan modal sosial lokal, kepemimpinan adaptif, budaya sekolah, dan komunikasi digital sebagai strategi meningkatkan daya saing sekolah negeri di wilayah semi-perdesaan secara berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: school branding; kepemimpinan kepala sekolah; budaya sekolah; media digital; manajemen strategik pendidikan.

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Introduction

Education at the junior high school (SMP) level plays a strategic role in addressing the challenges of globalization, with school branding a crucial factor in attracting public trust. Recent developments show that the image of a school is not just a visual promotion, but a mental representation that influences the way the public assesses the reputation, quality, and credibility of the school (Hemsley et al, 2016). the reality is that many school principals still face difficulties in building a strong and consistent school image because they are often considered limited to incidental promotional activities, such as during the Admission of New Students (PPDB) (Azzani, 2025). fact, the formation of a positive image requires a sustainable synergy of internal quality culture and the integration of the behavior of all school residents (Aprilia et al. 2024).

The phenomenon of school branding in Indonesia is currently undergoing a very dynamic transformation, along with the escalation of increasingly fierce competition between educational institutions, both in the public and private sectors. In an increasingly competitive education ecosystem, each institution competes to formulate effective communication strategies to attract the interest of prospective students while strengthening legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the wider community. This condition places the school image as one of the determining factors and crucial considerations for parents and students in determining the most appropriate educational institution. A school that succeeds in emitting a positive image is generally automatically perceived to have superior academic quality standards, professional and transparent management governance, and the availability of a safe and supportive learning environment for the growth of students' character. However, behind this urgency, the reality on the ground shows that there are still many public schools, especially those located in regional or peripheral areas, facing complex challenges and structural obstacles in building and maintaining a resilient, authentic, and sustainable reputation in order to survive in the midst of increasingly competitive global competition.

One of the crucial phenomena that emerges in the world of education today is the wide gap between the real quality of a school and the image perceived by the wider community. This problem stems from the lack of understanding of educational institution leaders regarding the urgency of school branding as a long-term strategic process. Until now, the majority of school principals are still stuck in a narrow view that identifies branding solely with seasonal promotional activities ahead of the New Student Admission (PPDB). They have not yet realized that branding should be an integral part of holistic education quality management. As a result of this misconception, the image of schools tends to be built instantaneously, artificially, and unsustainably. Such communication patterns ultimately fail to reflect the identity, basic values, and authentic character of the educational institution, making it difficult to maintain public trust in the long term.

The gap between ideal potential and reality in the field is evident in UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar. Although geographically this school occupies a very strategic location on the edge of the main highway, which should provide advantages in terms of visibility, it turns out that it is not directly proportional to the interest of the community to send their children there. New student admission data over the last five years (2021-2025) show very sharp fluctuations and tend to be concerning, with consecutive enrollment numbers of 17, 14, 14, 9, and then crawling to 26 students. The instability of this figure is not just an administrative problem, but a strong signal of a crisis of public trust and the degradation of the image of schools in the eyes of the public.

The results of initial observations identified that the fluctuation in the number of students was rooted in the perception of the public who still underestimated the quality of education in this school compared to private institutions or madrasas around it which were considered superior in quality and character. This problem is exacerbated by the non-optimal promotional strategy in the realm of digital media and the low active participation of parents in supporting school programs. Internally, the lack of a collective work culture oriented towards the values of excellence has caused branding efforts to be stuck in a very shallow approach. School strategies tend to be only ceremonial and visual, such as the installation of physical banners, without being able to touch the 'spirit' or authentic institutional character. As a result, the identity of the school fails to be internalized into the public mind, so that schools find it difficult to compete for the attention of prospective students in the midst of the current educational dynamics (Aprilia et al. 2024).

Mapping research over the past ten years shows the shift in focus from public communication management to digital strategic leadership. (Saepudin and Irawaty 2020) examine the role of communication facilitators, followed by Dwi and Sholeh (2021) which emphasizes quality culture management. Susilo (2022) explores awareness strategies, while Zuriati dkk, (2024) highlight stakeholder collaboration.

Latest research by Azzani Starting to integrate positive culture and digital literacy in branding. The researcher argues that to close the gap in research sites, a Strategic Management Approach is needed that combines managerial perspectives with the social realities of public schools in semi-rural areas. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on public schools with limited facilities that are able to design competitive branding, in contrast to previous research which mostly focused on established urban private schools.

This research comprehensively aims to explore and analyze in depth various strategies implemented by school principals in an effort to strengthen the image of the institution (school branding) in the work unit of UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar. In addition, this research is also directed to identify and map in detail the supporting factors that accelerate the process, as well as dissect various obstacles that often arise in its implementation in the field. Theoretically, the results of this research are expected to be able to make a substantive contribution to the development of the treasure of education management science, especially in enriching the discourse on strategic leadership in building institutional reputation. Practically, this research is projected to be an inspirational reference and guideline for school principals and educators in formulating tactical steps to strengthen the identity and character of their educational institutions

The initial proposition in this study is based on the assumption that the effectiveness of school branding is highly dependent on strategies that are carried out collaboratively, integrated, and sustainably. This includes systematic efforts to improve service quality standards, strengthen a positive school culture, and optimize the use of digital media as a means of strategic communication. The synergy of these various aspects is believed to be able to boost the existence while positioning the school at a higher level of competitiveness in the eyes of the wider community. Through the application of a structured and systematic managerial approach, it is hoped that the trust of stakeholders can grow significantly, which ultimately has a positive impact on improving the quality of education as a whole.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type to explore in depth the principal's strategy in improving school branding (Moleong 2021). The focus of the research is directed at a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of image management in the public school environment based on the perspective of participants who are directly involved in the real-life context in the field. The research was carried out at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar, which is located in Batu Belah Village, Kampar District, Kampar Regency, Riau Province. The research process, starting from proposal preparation, licensing, data collection in the field, to the preparation of the final report, lasted for a period of eight months, starting from June 2025 to January 2026. The research subject or participant is selected based on

the criteria of knowledge and direct involvement with the research object (Sugiyono 2021).

Participants consisted of one Principal, one Deputy Principal, one Curriculum Representative, one Public Relations Officer, two Teachers, and three Guardians. The determination of participants is based on the depth of knowledge, experience, background, and direct involvement of individuals in the phenomenon being studied to ensure the credibility and relevance of the data. The ideal informant criteria refer to a figure who is able to understand the direction of the research, has good reflective and communicative skills, and shows a high commitment to time and enthusiasm to collaborate in the process of extracting information. Primary data sources are obtained directly through interaction with these participants, while secondary sources are obtained through official documents, school archives, and photos of activities relevant to the institution's image. The researcher acts as the main instrument in data collection, supported by interview guidelines, observation sheets, and documentation tools.

Qualitative data analysis in this study is a dynamic and circular process that involves the organization and in-depth interpretation of non-numerical data to uncover essential meanings and patterns through three integrated stages that ensure the traceability of findings from raw data to become a central theme (Miles, Hubberman, and Saldana 2013). The process begins with data reduction through coding and categorization to identify units of meaning relevant to the school branding strategy, a crucial step to ensure that each theme that emerges is firmly rooted in data-driven field data and not just the researcher's assumptions. Furthermore, the data is managed in the presentation stage through narrative synthesis and systematic visualization to assemble fragmented information into coherent dominant patterns, so that the inter-category relationships and the direction of formation of the research theme regarding leadership strategies can be clearly seen. At the peak, at the conclusion and verification stage, the researcher conducts an in-depth interpretation to build a main theme that can answer research questions and contribute to the theory of education management, while re-verifying field records through an audit trail process to ensure that all findings authentically represent the reality at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar and have a solid internal consistency.

To ensure the validity and scientific accountability in this study, the data credibility test was carried out through a series of comprehensive strategies specifically designed to strengthen traceability (audit trail) in the process of forming the research theme to truly represent the strategic reality at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar objectively (Leadley, 2023). This effort began with the extension of observations to build the depth of understanding and saturation of information in the field, which was accompanied by increased diligence through literature

enrichment and school branding references to sharpen the critical power of researchers in describing data accurately. The main focus of this credibility rests on triangulation that is applied in-depth through three dimensions, namely: source triangulation to verify the consistency of information by comparing the perspectives of school principals, fellow teachers, and related stakeholders; triangulation techniques to cross data obtained from interviews, participatory observations, and documentation studies; and time triangulation to ensure information stability in different situations and conditions. Through this detailed triangulation process, each category of data is cross-tested to find consistent patterns, so that the process of forming the research theme has a strong empirical basis and is systematically tracked, which is ultimately refined with member checks as a final confirmation step to the informants to ensure that the interpretation and meaning produced by the researcher is fully aligned with their authentic intentions and experiences.

Result and Discussion

Results

Internal Quality Strengthening Strategy and Character Culture

The results of the study show that the principal's strategy at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar is focused on strengthening the quality of teachers as a key element in shaping public perception. The principal emphasizes the professionalism of teachers through mastery of materials, objective assessments, and the role of homeroom teachers in guiding students personally. In addition to the academic aspect, character formation is carried out through daily habituation programs, such as duha prayers, which are carried out regularly at 07.15-07.30 WIB, as well as Tahfidz's flagship program to instill discipline and noble morals. This school culture is built through the example of leadership and the collective synergy of the entire teacher assembly in supervising the ethics and behavior of students in the school environment.

One of the main strategies in improving the image of schools is to strengthen the quality of teachers as the spearhead of educational services. The Principal emphasized that the quality of teachers greatly determines the public's perception of the school. He said:

"Alhamdulillah, the quality of professional teachers. They have done their job. They also assess according to the requirements for students. They provide the best service to students by carrying out their duties as guardian teachers, and they have already carried out that."

The statement shows that the principal emphasizes the professionalism of teachers, both in aspects of material mastery, learning assessment, and the role of homeroom teachers who guide students personally. Teachers not only play the role of teachers, but also as character coaches and companions in the development of students. Furthermore, the Principal added:

"The role of teachers is also extraordinary. They can adapt to the times, utilizing technology and media in learning. They lead students with a good approach."

This shows that there is encouragement to innovate learning by utilizing technology and digital media. Adaptation to the times is an important part of building a modern school image that is relevant to the needs of the current generation. The Deputy Principal for Curriculum strengthened the statement by conveying:

"Teachers are considered quite competent in teaching and have a good approach to students and continue to be encouraged to develop their professionalism."

From this statement, it can be seen that teacher professional development is carried out on an ongoing basis. Teachers are not only judged by their teaching ability, but also by their humanist approach to students, which creates a conducive and close-knit learning atmosphere. In line with this, the Master said:

"quality of teachers, facilities, and school services contributes greatly to the school's image because it is directly felt by students and parents."

This statement confirms that the school's image is formed from the first-hand experience felt by students and parents. If learning services run well, communication is smooth, and teachers show high dedication, then public trust will grow naturally.

The Deputy Principal for Student Affairs, Hafizul Rahman, emphasized that the school's identity is built through the internalization of the values of discipline, example, and responsibility. He delivered: 126 Interviews with Nurkhairiyah, Interview on December 17, 2025, (Principal of SMPN 3 Kampar), in Kampar, Interview with the Principal

"Identity is built through habituation of discipline, example, and responsibility."

From this statement, it can be understood that school culture is not only formed through rules, but through real examples from leaders and teachers. Exemplification becomes a key strategy, as students tend to imitate the behavior they see every day. The teacher, Erni, also corroborated this by conveying:

"The morning habituation program that teaches discipline and character strengthening activities in each learning reflects the values of the school."

This means that character education is not only carried out through morning activities, but is also integrated into the learning process in the classroom. Teachers play a role in instilling the values of responsibility, cooperation, and mutual respect in every learning activity. Based on the results of observations, researchers found that the school atmosphere showed a fairly good discipline culture. Students arrive on time and take part in morning habituation activities before entering class. Teachers were also seen actively supervising and guiding students during the activity. The interaction between teachers and students seems more familiar but still maintains discipline and ethics.

Visual Identity Optimization and Digital Media

In an effort to expand the reach of information, schools actively utilize various digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook to publish positive activities and school achievements. Visually, the school has an identity in the form of a logo with a philosophical meaning that reflects the vision of the institution, as well as the use of the dominant colors blue and green which symbolize calm and trust. The use of social media has proven to be effective in influencing people's initial perceptions and becoming an important source of information for prospective parents in determining school choices.

Observations also show that schools are starting to actively use digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube as public communication media. In addition, the documentation of brochures and school publications shows that there are efforts to build the school's visual identity through the use of certain logos and colors in promotional media.

The principal, Nurkhairiyah, explained that previously the existence of schools in the digital world was still very limited. He conveyed:

"In the past, when I searched for information about this school on Google, there was no information. Now thank God it has increased."

The statement shows that school leaders are aware of the importance of digital visibility as part of an image improvement strategy. The presence of school information in search engines is the first step to expand the reach of publications and strengthen the school's legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Furthermore, the Principal added:

"We socialize schools by utilizing digital media, such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook."

The use of various social media platforms shows that schools do not only rely on conventional promotions, but adapt to the development of information technology. The content published includes learning activities, character habituation programs, student achievements, and other important information. This aims to build positive perceptions and provide transparency to the public regarding school activities.

The Deputy Principal for Public Relations, Siti Rajulia, explained that public communication is carried out through various media, both digital and non-digital. He said:

"Schools use social media, brochures, and public activities as a means of communication."

Thus, communication strategies are not only limited to social media, but also through the distribution of brochures, direct socialization to elementary schools shows that schools combine online and offline communication strategies in an integrated manner. Judging from the aspect of visual identity, the informant

revealed that the school already has a logo with a philosophical foundation that represents the vision, achievements, and identity of the institution. The use of blue and green is symbolically intended to an impression of calm and credibility. However, the effectiveness of this imaging is still constrained by design inconsistencies in various promotional media, which are rooted in the absence of formal visual identity guidelines as a standard reference for schools.

The Impact of Strategy on Public Interest

The implementation of the branding strategy has a real impact on increasing the number of new student registrants at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar. Based on observation data, the positive trend in the last five years can be seen as follows:

Table 1 Number of New Student Registrants in 2021-2025

No.	Year	Number of Students
1.	2021/2022	17 Students
2.	2022/2023	14 Students
3.	2023/2024	14 Students
4.	2024/2025	9 Students
5.	2025/2026	26 Students

Source: Documentation Study Results Data (2026)

This increase is a strong indicator that public trust has been re-established; It was even reported that parents began to deliver registration files before the new student admission period officially opened. This success is the result of the synergy of various approaches, ranging from improving the quality of teachers, strengthening character culture through religious programs such as duha prayer and Tahfidz, to optimizing promotions through digital media such as Instagram and TikTok. Thus, the data proves that school branding strategies carried out in a planned and sustainable manner are able to increase the reputation, attractiveness, and existence of schools in the midst of competition from educational institutions.

Principal, Nurkhairiyah, said that the approach to the community was carried out directly and personally, not only through social media or publication of activities. He explained:

"I went to the field with public relations to meet the community. I give religious briefings and lectures... In that way we approach the elderly and the surrounding community."

The statement shows that the principal not only carries out administrative functions, but also plays the role of a public figure who is present in the community. Religious lectures and briefings are a means to build emotional and spiritual

closeness with parents and community leaders. This approach reinforces the school's image as an institution that focuses not only on academic aspects, but also on moral and religious values.

From the side of the student's parents, Aldi Saputra said that:

"The experience of interacting with the school is quite positive, especially in terms of academic services and basic communication with teachers."

This statement shows that the relationships built are not only formal, but also communicative. Responsive academic services and open communication between teachers and parents are important factors in building trust. When parents feel involved and get clear information about their child's development, the image of the school will be positively formed. A harmonious approach and relationship with the community is one of the important strategies of the principal in improving the image of the school at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar. The principal not only carries out managerial functions, but also actively builds communication and closeness with the community through social, religious, and open educational activities.

Discussion

Analysis Of Leadership Strategies In Building A Quality Culture

The Principal's strategy in improving the image of the institution at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar can be analyzed comprehensively through the perspective of education management, transformational leadership, public relations management, and brand image theory in the context of educational institutions (Satria et al. 2019). Based on the results of the research, the formation of a positive school image cannot be achieved through an instant approach or just symbolic promotion, but must go through an integrated systemic process between improving the quality of academic and non-academic services, strengthening the culture and character of the school, optimizing public communication channels, and synergistic collaboration with the community. This is in line with the theoretical view that the reputation of an educational institution is a long-term accumulation of public perception of consistent quality of service, values adhered to, and first-hand experience felt by all stakeholders (Azhar et al. 2022).

The findings of the study on strengthening the quality of teachers and educational services at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar show that the image of the school is an accumulation of substantive service quality that is directly felt by stakeholders. This is in line with the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) theory by (Rahmawati (2025) which emphasizes the dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy in public services. The principal plays the role of instructional leader who places the teacher as the spearhead of image formation, where their professionalism creates a positive learning experience that increases the credibility of the school.

The implementation of religious habituation and discipline programs also reflects the integration of character education that touches on aspects of moral

knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The success of internalizing these values is supported by the example of teachers as role models, in accordance with the theory of Social Learning by Wirachman and Kurniawati (2023) which states that individuals learn through imitation of a consistent social model. This strong school culture is not just a routine, but a strategic instrument to create a unique identity that distinguishes this public school from other educational institutions around the world (Nurizka and Rahim 2020).

This research provides a substantive contribution in the form of the formulation of a hybrid school branding model designed specifically for public educational institutions in semi-rural areas. This model integrates the forces of local social capital such as kinship values and communal trust as the foundation of legitimacy, with adaptive leadership of school principals as the driving force for internal quality cultural transformation (Iqabe 2017). The novelty of these findings lies in the synergy between the "grassroots" approach and the use of digital media as a catalyst that breaks geographical isolation, so that the excellence of the school's character can be amplified widely beyond the boundaries of its territory (Berkovich and Hassan 2024). Thus, this study emphasizes that the branding strategy of public schools in the regions does not have to imitate a capital-intensive urban model, but can be built through leadership orchestration that is able to convert social relations of the community and information technology into authentic competitive competitiveness (Yusrianti et al. 2023).

Implications of Strategic Communication and the Contribution of Originality

The main supporting factor that was successfully identified in this study was the high level of teacher professionalism. The Principal expressly stated that the existence of qualified teachers is a fundamental pillar that directly supports the quality of education, where the educators in this institution have carried out their duties professionally while consistently providing the best service for all students (Asy'ari 2025). These empirical findings are very much in line with the theory of teacher competence mandated in Law Number 14 of 2005 concerning Teachers and Lecturers, which juridically affirms that an educator is obliged to master four main competencies to support his professionalism, namely pedagogical, professional, social, and personality competencies (Yunita 2022).

Based on the service quality theory put forward by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, the quality of an institution's services is greatly influenced by five main dimensions, namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. In this context, the professionalism of teachers at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar clearly represents the form of reliability through reliability in carrying out instructional tasks, assurance through trusted competency guarantees, and empathy in the form of deep concern for student development. When educators are able to be responsive to the needs of students and parents, it will directly escalate satisfaction, which,

according to customer satisfaction theory, is a crucial foundation for the formation of loyalty and positive recommendation bias. In the realm of education, this loyalty transforms into a significant increase in the trust of students' parents, which then drives organic word-of-mouth promotion in the community (Muadin 2022).

The use of various digital media at UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar shows the effective implementation of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) in building public brand awareness. The findings that social media influences parents' decisions reinforce the argument that in the digital age, online reputation is becoming an integral part of the overall image of the institution. In addition to digital media, the principal's personal approach through religious lectures reflects relational leadership that builds trust through emotional closeness (Gaol 2023). This triggers word-of-mouth communication which is considered more authentic and trusted by the public.

The originality of this research lies in its focus on public schools in semi-rural areas with limited facilities that are able to build competitive branding. In contrast to previous research by Saepudin and Irawaty, (2020) The majority of which focus on private schools or schools in large urban areas with abundant resources, this study proves that the synergy between internal quality management and inclusive public communication can be a model for other public high schools in improving competitiveness. Thus, a quality-based comprehensive strategy is the main key in ensuring the existence and trust of the public in educational institutions.

This study formulates a hybrid model of school branding that is unique to public educational institutions in semi-rural areas. This model is based on the use of local social capital such as religious values and a close family network as the foundation of the moral legitimacy of schools in the eyes of the community. The power of social capital is activated by the principal's leadership through a relational leadership approach that can transform the school's internal culture into an authentic narrative of excellence (Surakarta and Azzani 2025). The novelty of this research lies in how digital media is integrated not just as a promotional tool, but as a catalyst that amplifies these local values into a wider public space, to be able to break geographical barriers and limitations of physical facilities (Al Hidayati 2025). Thus, the theoretical contribution of this study confirms that the effectiveness of branding in transitional public schools is not measured by the luxury of infrastructure, but by the orchestration of leadership that is able to synergize traditional communal beliefs with modern and inclusive digital communication strategies.

On the other hand, this study also identified a number of significant inhibiting factors, where one of the main obstacles is the limitation of physical facilities, especially laboratories and technology-based learning facilities. Judging from the theory of management of educational facilities and infrastructure, the

availability of adequate facilities is a crucial component that determines the effectiveness of the learning process, so limitations in this aspect have the potential to negatively affect public perception, especially in the midst of the current era of fierce competition between educational institutions (Chotimah and Sulistyorini 2024). condition is emphasized by Michael Porter's thinking about competitive advantage, which states that an organization's competitive advantage can be achieved through differentiation strategies and optimization of resource quality; Therefore, infrastructure that is not optimal can directly degrade the competitiveness of schools in the education market (Stonehouse and Snowdon 2007). In addition to facility constraints, visual identity inconsistency is also a challenge for schools, even though according to Kevin Lane Keller in brand equity theory, the consistency of visual elements is an important foundation in building strong brand equity. Without a standard and standardized visual identity guidelines, the image of the institution built through symbols and color representations will lose its strength, where inconsistent branding can ultimately weaken the public's brand awareness of the school's distinctive identity.

Conclusion

The most important finding in this study reveals that the school branding strategy in public schools in semi-rural areas is not determined by the size of the promotion budget, but by strengthening social capital through Tahfidz's flagship program which is surprisingly able to increase the number of registrants by up to two times within one school year. This study shows what is only known after in-depth observation, namely that public trust in UPT SMP Negeri 3 Kampar is formed not through formal advertising, but through the active presence of the principal in community religious activities that build emotional closeness. The synergy between teacher professionalism and changes in student behavior that became more disciplined and religious became tangible evidence that was felt directly by parents, so that the positive image of the school was built organically even before the official registration period began.

This study confirms previous research on the importance of visionary leadership in reputation management, but at the same time contributes a new perspective on the effectiveness of the Strategic Management Approach in resource-constrained public junior high schools. This paper contributes to the concept that public schools can compete with private schools through the integration of humanistic internal service quality with the optimization of digital media as a means of public transparency. These findings enrich the study of education management by showing that strong public relations management based on local values can be a strategic instrument to improve the competitiveness of public educational institutions in semi-rural areas.

This study has limitations because it was only conducted at one location of a single case study in a semi-rural area with a sample of participants limited to the UPT environment of SMP Negeri 3 Kampar. This study is also limited to data variations that have not been compared at different levels of education or the long-term impact of school digital images. Therefore, further research that accommodates more varied cases with a larger sample is needed to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of school branding in various regional contexts. With the results of a broader study, the formulation of more appropriate education management policies can be produced to support the strengthening of the reputation of public schools nationally.

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