Open Access



Journal of Scientific Insights
E-ISSN: 3062-8571
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69930/jsi.v3i6.998
Research Article

ScienceTech. Group

Vol. 3 (6), 2026
Page: 794-801

A School Branding Strategy Based on Islamic Values to Enhance the Image of Educational Institutions at Muhammadiyah Junior High School Batam

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Abstract. *Competition among educational institutions requires schools to build a strong image through academic quality and consistently demonstrated identities and values. This study analyzes Islamic value-based branding strategies in building the institutional image of SMP Muhammadiyah Batam. Unlike studies that primarily emphasize promotion and external communication, this study focuses on the internalization of Islamic values and the role of teachers in shaping school identity. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 purposively selected informants—the principal, three vice-principals, three teachers, six students, six parents, and one school committee member—supported by non-participatory observation and document analysis. Data were analyzed through condensation, display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings show that school branding is rooted in an intended internal identity grounded in Islamic values and enacted through religious habituation, learning practices, role modeling, character development, educational services, and achievement development. Parents' and the school committee's accounts indicate that religious guidance, discipline, and character building are also recognized externally, supporting the emergence of a perceived school image. Teachers function as key actors who translate institutional values into stakeholder experiences, while public communication reinforces rather than creates the school's identity. These findings clarify an inside-out branding mechanism linking internal identity, teacher practices, stakeholder experiences, and externally perceived image. The study is relevant to SDG 4 (Quality Education) because it illustrates how values-based, inclusive, and quality-oriented educational practices can strengthen stakeholder trust, without claiming to measure SDG outcomes directly.*

Keywords: *Islamic Values; School Branding; Inside-Out Branding; Brand Image; Islamic Education*

1. Introduction

Competition among educational institutions positions schools not only as providers of learning but also as institutions that need to establish a distinctive identity, reputation, and character that can be recognized by the public. In this context, *school branding* has become an important part of educational institutions' strategies for shaping public perceptions of school quality and excellence. For Islamic educational institutions, *branding* is more complex because school image is associated not only with academic achievement and service quality but also with the institution's ability to manifest Islamic values in school culture, teaching and learning, the behavior of school members, and relationships with the community. Therefore, *branding* cannot be built solely through symbols, slogans, promotional activities, or digital

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Received: 14 October 2026/ Accepted: 30 October 2026 / Available online: 3 November 2026

publications; rather, it requires consistency between the identity communicated by the school and the educational experiences received by its stakeholders.

A growing body of research has demonstrated increasing attention to *branding* in Islamic educational institutions. Hafid, Rofiq, and Aimah showed that the integration of Islamic values and educational marketing can be used to build a madrasah's image.[i] Their findings indicate that religious values can become part of an institution's identity while simultaneously serving as a means of differentiation in an increasingly competitive educational environment. Ahmad and Mustofa also demonstrated that *internal branding* and *Islamic branding* contribute to the formation of an Islamic school's image by linking institutional identity with educational practices.[ii] Meanwhile, Abdurrofi and Susilo highlighted the importance of *branding* strategies in differentiating Islamic educational institutions by strengthening the distinctive characteristics and advantages of schools. These studies confirm that *school branding* has evolved beyond merely promotional activities toward broader efforts to build institutional identity and public trust.

Nevertheless, the existing literature still leaves room for explaining how an Islamic value-based identity is developed from within the school organization, internalized by members of the school community, translated into educational experiences, and subsequently contributes to the formation of an external image. Previous studies have addressed Islamic values, educational marketing, *internal branding*, and school differentiation; however, the processual relationship among internal identity, teachers' practices, stakeholder experiences, public communication, and school image has not been sufficiently explained as an integrated mechanism. This gap is important because an institution's image is shaped not only by the messages communicated by the school to the public but also by students' and parents' experiences of learning, role modeling, services, school culture, and interactions with teachers and school administrators. Therefore, further research is needed to conceptualize *branding* as a process that moves from strengthening internal identity toward shaping external perceptions.

This gap is particularly relevant in the context of SMP Muhammadiyah Batam. As a school that embodies Muhammadiyah identity and Islamic values, its institutional identity cannot be represented merely through religious attributes but must be manifested in educational practices that are experienced by students and recognized by parents and the wider community. Values such as *amanah* (trustworthiness), discipline, exemplary conduct, responsibility, *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), service, and excellence become meaningful for *branding* when they are translated into leadership, teachers' behavior, teaching and learning, character development, school programs, services to parents, and relationships between the school and the community. Within this process, teachers occupy an important position because they interact directly with students and serve as key actors in translating institutional values into educational experiences. Meanwhile, public communication and digital media can function as channels for representing the experiences and identity that have already been established within the school.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze Islamic value-based branding strategies in building the institutional image of SMP Muhammadiyah Batam, focusing on how Islamic values are developed as the school's intended identity, internalized through school culture and educational practices, and represented by teachers through the experiences of students and other stakeholders. The study also examines how these experiences are communicated to the public and contribute to an externally perceived school image. Unlike approaches that

primarily position branding as an external communication activity, this study explores an inside-out mechanism of image formation: Islamic values provide the foundation of identity, teachers and school culture translate these values into educational practices, stakeholders experience those practices, and public communication subsequently reinforces the image. Accordingly, this study contributes to the conceptualization of inside-out branding in Islamic education by clarifying the relationship among intended identity, teacher enactment, stakeholder experience, and perceived image. The educational implications are also relevant to SDG 4 (Quality Education), particularly its emphasis on inclusive, values-based, and quality learning environments; however, the present study does not directly measure SDG 4 outcomes.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a single-case study design to obtain an in-depth, contextual understanding of Islamic value-based school branding at SMP Muhammadiyah Batam. The case was bounded by one institutional setting and focused on four interrelated domains: the school's intended Islamic identity, the enactment of that identity in culture and educational practices, stakeholder experiences and perceptions, and the role of communication media in representing the school externally. The case study design was therefore appropriate for examining how branding is produced through interactions among policies, school culture, teachers, students, parents, and institutional communication rather than through promotional activity alone.

Data were collected through non-participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Twenty informants were recruited purposively because they had direct involvement in, knowledge of, or experience with the school's Islamic values and branding practices: the principal, three vice-principals, three teachers, six students, six parents, and one school committee member. The student and parent groups were included specifically to capture the perspectives of those who directly experience the school's learning, religious habituation, character development, and services, while school leaders, teachers, and the committee provided organizational and governance perspectives. Rather than treating these perspectives as interchangeable, the analysis compared internally intended identity (principals, vice-principals, teachers, and institutional documents) with stakeholder experiences and externally oriented perceptions (students, parents, and the school committee). Observations focused on school culture, religious activities, teaching and learning, interaction patterns, teacher role modeling, promotional activities, visual identity, and digital communication. This multi-source design was used to provide thematic coverage across organizational, pedagogical, student, parent, and community perspectives and to support triangulation of recurring patterns.

Document analysis was used to corroborate the interview and observation data. The materials reviewed included the school profile, vision and mission statements, flagship programs, records of religious activities, publicity materials, event photographs and videos, the school website and social media, brochures, banners, news reports, and student achievement records. Data analysis followed the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During condensation, evidence was grouped around the study's analytical sequence: Islamic values and intended identity, teacher and school practices, stakeholder experiences, externally perceived image, and public communication. Credibility was strengthened by comparing evidence across interviews,

observations, and documents; transferability was supported through contextual description; and dependability and confirmability were addressed through systematic documentation of data sources and analytic categories.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Islamic Value-Based School Branding Strategy at SMP Muhammadiyah Batam

The findings indicate that the branding strategy of SMP Muhammadiyah Batam begins with an intended internal identity grounded in Islamic values rather than with external promotion. School leaders and institutional documents emphasize trustworthiness (amanah), discipline, exemplary conduct, responsibility, brotherhood (ukhuwah), service, and excellence as values to be enacted through school culture and educational services. Field observations supported this intended identity: religious routines, teacher-student interactions, character-development activities, and achievement programs were visible in everyday school practice. Thus, the school's branding process is best understood as an effort to align what the institution intends to represent with what stakeholders actually experience.

Observed forms of value internalization included Dhuha prayer, congregational prayer, Quranic recitation (tadarus), Quran memorization (tahfiz), short religious talks (kultum), character-building activities, Muhammadiyah Student Association (IPM) activities, and extracurricular programs. These practices provide concrete evidence that the school's religious identity is enacted beyond slogans or visual symbols. Islamic values were also integrated into teaching: general-subject teachers were encouraged to connect subject matter with relevant character and religious values. This pattern is consistent with Cahyanto et al., who argue that Islamic school branding can be anchored in core values translated into curriculum, school environment, and character development. In the present case, however, the distinctive finding is the process through which daily enactment creates stakeholder experience before the identity is communicated externally.

A clear distinction emerged between intended school identity and externally perceived brand image. The former refers to the values and qualities the school deliberately seeks to cultivate; the latter refers to how external stakeholders interpret the school based on their experiences. Interviews with parents and the school committee identified religious guidance, discipline, character building, teacher conduct, and educational service as salient features of their perception of SMP Muhammadiyah Batam. These data provide direct external evidence that several elements of the school's intended identity are being recognized by stakeholders. The findings therefore support a transition from intended identity toward perceived image, but they do not imply that every institutional aspiration has automatically become a public perception. This distinction is important because parental school choice is also influenced by teacher competence, facilities, cost, location, safety, and other practical considerations, as noted by Pratama and Sugiarto and by Jonathan et al.

Across the evidence, Islamic values function as the core of the school's identity, while people and processes determine whether those values become credible. Teacher role modeling, religious habituation, instructional quality, student mentoring, service to parents, and achievement development repeatedly appeared as mechanisms through which values are made visible. This is consistent with Musthofa et al., Karsono et al., and Munjin, who emphasize school culture, internal quality, and distinctive institutional strengths in Islamic school branding. The contribution of the present case is more specific: it shows that values

acquire branding significance when they are translated into observable practices and stakeholder experiences.

Public communication was found to function primarily as reinforcement rather than as the origin of the school's identity. Social media, activity publications, achievement documentation, and community engagement extend school practices into the public sphere, but the evidence suggests that their credibility depends on the quality of what is already experienced inside the school. This finding is broadly consistent with studies on digital school branding by Aisyah et al., Novita et al., and Ramadhani and Setyowati. At SMP Muhammadiyah Batam, however, digital media is analytically positioned after internal value enactment and stakeholder experience, not before them.

The case also cautions against overclaiming the effect of brand image. Previous research has shown that a positive image does not necessarily determine enrollment decisions on its own; digital communication, reference groups, cost, location, family needs, and service quality may also matter. Accordingly, the present findings demonstrate the strengthening of perceived image and stakeholder trust rather than claiming that Islamic value-based branding is the sole determinant of public choice.

Taken together, the empirical sequence is: Islamic values shape intended identity; school culture and teachers translate identity into practice; students and other stakeholders experience those practices; parents and the school committee interpret these experiences; and public communication amplifies the resulting image. This process forms the basis of the inside-out branding model proposed in this study.

3.2. The Role of Teachers in Enhancing the Image of the Educational Institution at SMP Muhammadiyah Batam

Research data position teachers as central actors in translating the school's intended Islamic identity into experiences that students can observe and evaluate. Teachers internalize Islamic values in instruction, model expected conduct, mentor students, innovate in learning, provide educational services, and participate in maintaining a religious school culture. Interviews and observations indicate that this role is not limited to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers: teachers of general subjects also connect learning with relevant character and religious values. In this sense, teachers function as the operational bridge between institutional values and stakeholder experience.

Observation provided concrete examples of this role. Teachers were seen participating in congregational prayers, maintaining discipline, using polite language, guiding students during religious routines, and showing attentiveness in everyday interactions. Students therefore encounter the school's values through teachers' conduct as well as through formal instruction. This supports Musthofa et al.'s emphasis on teacher role modeling in adab-based branding. In the present case, role modeling has a dual function: it supports character formation and simultaneously tests whether the school's claimed identity is consistent with daily practice.

Teachers also contribute to the school's image through instructional professionalism. Their use of active learning, student mentoring, character guidance, and responsive educational service shapes the experiences later interpreted by students and parents. Prior studies similarly identify teacher competence, learning quality, and service delivery as important elements of school choice and branding. The present findings extend this literature

by showing that teacher professionalism and religious identity are not separate branding dimensions; they operate together through the lived educational experience.

Analytically, teachers can therefore be understood as internal brand representatives, although this label is the researchers' interpretation rather than a direct term used by informants. Their contribution can be summarized in five functions: internalizer of Islamic values, role model of character, student mentor, instructional innovator, and representative of institutional identity. These functions connect the school's values with students' experiences and, subsequently, with parents' and community perceptions. As shown in Figure 1, this relationship forms a sequential inside-out process from school values to institutional image.

Overall, the role of teachers in enhancing the image of SMP Muhammadiyah Batam can be categorized into five functions: internalizer of Islamic values, role model of character, mentor to students, innovator in learning, and representative of the institution's identity. The relationship can be formulated as follows :

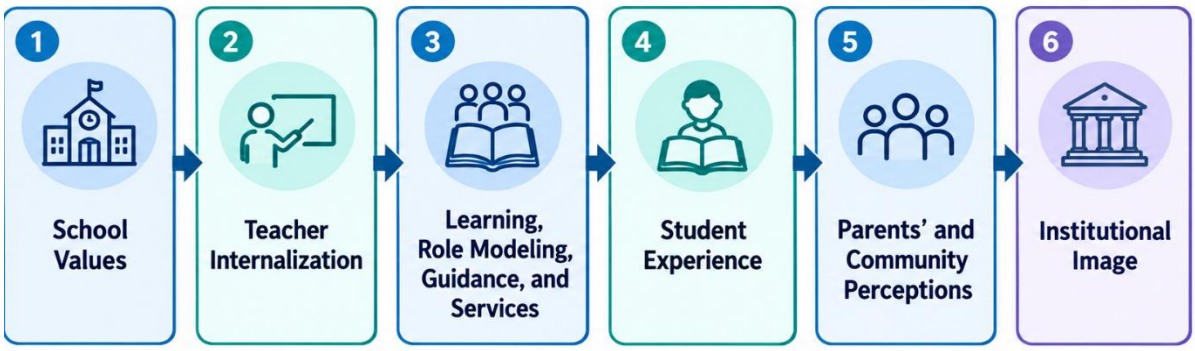


Figure 1. The Process of Institutional Image Formation trough School Values, Teacher Internalization, Educational Services, Student Experiences, and Public Perceptions

Conclusions

This study concludes that Islamic value-based school branding at SMP Muhammadiyah Batam operates through an inside-out process. Islamic values constitute the intended identity of the school; teachers and school culture translate that identity into religious habituation, instruction, character development, service, and achievement-oriented practices; stakeholders experience and interpret those practices; and public communication subsequently reinforces the perceived institutional image. The conceptual contribution of the study lies in distinguishing intended identity from externally perceived image and in clarifying teachers' role as the link between institutional values and stakeholder experience. The findings therefore do not suggest that all institutional aspirations are automatically accepted as public perceptions or that branding alone determines school choice.

Practical implications follow from this process. School leaders should prioritize consistency between Islamic values and the quality of everyday educational practice, strengthen teacher professionalism and role modeling, maintain responsive services for students and parents, and use digital communication to represent verified school experiences rather than to substitute for internal quality. These recommendations are intended to strengthen alignment between what the school claims, what stakeholders experience, and what the public ultimately perceives.

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