



## **Roles of the Principal's Personal Branding on Parents' Preferences in Choosing a School**

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### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh meningkatnya persaingan antarsekolah negeri yang menuntut kepala sekolah tidak hanya berperan sebagai manajer pendidikan, tetapi juga sebagai figur yang membangun kepercayaan publik. Personal branding kepala sekolah dipandang memiliki peran strategis dalam memengaruhi preferensi orang tua dalam memilih sekolah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk: (1) menganalisis implementasi personal branding kepala sekolah di SMAN 1 Praya Barat, (2) mendeskripsikan bentuk preferensi orang tua dalam memilih SMAN 1 Praya Barat, dan (3) menjelaskan implikasi personal branding kepala sekolah terhadap preferensi orang tua dalam memilih sekolah. Jenis penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis. Penelitian dilaksanakan di SMAN 1 Praya Barat dengan subjek kepala sekolah, wakil kepala sekolah, guru, orang tua siswa, komite sekolah, dan tokoh masyarakat. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi lapangan, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik untuk menemukan makna dan pola pengalaman subjek penelitian. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa: (1) personal branding kepala sekolah terimplementasi secara alamiah melalui kepemimpinan humanis-religius, gaya kepemimpinan komunikatif, kepribadian yang stabil, serta kehadiran sosial yang konsisten; (2) preferensi orang tua dibentuk oleh kepercayaan dan citra sekolah, kualitas layanan pendidikan, kesesuaian nilai, pengaruh sosial, dan persepsi terhadap kepemimpinan kepala sekolah; dan (3) personal branding kepala sekolah berimplikasi signifikan sebagai sumber kepercayaan publik yang memperkuat preferensi orang tua dalam memilih SMAN 1 Praya Barat.

**Kata Kunci** *Personal Branding, Kepala Sekolah, Preferensi Orang Tua, Kepemimpinan Pendidikan*

### **Abstract**

This research is motivated by the increasing competition between public schools which requires the principal not only to play the role of education manager, but also as a figure who builds public trust. The principal's personal branding is seen as having a strategic role in influencing parents' preferences in choosing a school. This study aims to: (1) analyze the implementation of the principal's personal branding in SMAN 1 Praya Barat, (2) describe the form of parental preference in choosing SMAN 1 Praya Barat, and (3) explain the implications of the principal's personal branding on parents' preferences in choosing a school. This type of research is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. The research was carried out at SMAN 1 Praya Barat with the subjects of the principal, vice principal, teachers, parents of students, school committees, and community leaders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to find the meaning and patterns of the research subject's experiences. The results of this study show that: (1) the personal branding of the principal is implemented naturally through humanist-religious leadership, communicative leadership style, stable personality, and consistent social presence; (2) parental preferences are shaped by the school's trust and image, the quality of educational services, the suitability of values, social influence, and perception of the principal's leadership; and (3) the personal branding of the principal has significant implications as a source of public trust that strengthens parents' preferences in choosing SMAN 1 Praya Barat.

**Keywords** *Personal Branding, School Principal, Parental Preferences, Educational Leadership*

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## Introduction

Competition between secondary schools in Indonesia is now getting tighter, both at the public and private levels. The public no longer judges schools solely from the academic aspect, but also from the image, reputation, and uniqueness of the institution in the eyes of the public (Rarasati et al., 2025). In this context, the role of the principal is very central because he is not only the manager of education, but also the representation of the face of the institution in front of the community. The figure of a school principal who is characterful, communicative, and visionary is often an important factor in shaping parents' trust and preferences in choosing a school for their children (Nurbawani, A. 2021).

The change in the educational landscape is in line with the development of the school as a service paradigm, which places schools as educational service providers that must be able to compete through the quality of service and the image of the institution (Rahmawati, R. 2024). The concept of school branding emphasizes that educational institutions need to manage identities, symbols, communication, and stakeholder experiences in an integrated manner so that a positive image and strong public trust are formed (Carnawi, C. 2024). In practice, school branding is not only seen in the slogan, logo, or physical design of the building, but mainly in the real experience of parents and students in interacting with the leader of the institution, namely the principal (Sholeh, M. I. 2023). Therefore, the reputation of the principal is one of the core elements in the construction of the school's image in the eyes of the public

School principals with strong personal branding are able to create institutional differentiation in the midst of relatively homogeneous competition, thus attracting public interest in entrusting their children's education to the school (Irwansyah, R., et al. 2021). In the era of information and social media, emotional factors and personal perceptions of institutional leaders increasingly influence parental decision-making. Consumer behavior theory explains that the decision to choose a service is not only based on rational considerations such as cost and facilities, but also on brand image, trust, and psychological closeness to the key figure behind the service (Putri et al., 2024). In the context of schools, this figure is personified in the principal as the supreme leader who is most often associated with the quality, discipline, and policy direction of the institution.

The principal's personal branding is a strategic instrument that functions to build a positive image and foster public trust in the school. This concept includes the ability of the principal to display professional competence, moral integrity, and an inspiring leadership style. Principals with strong personal branding are able to create institutional differentiation in the midst of homogeneous competition, thus attracting public interest in entrusting their children's education to the school (Nu'man, A., Sandiko, S., & Rozi, F., 2022). In the era of educational competition, emotional factors and personal perceptions of institutional leaders increasingly influence parental decision-making.

The principal is actually the main brand ambassador of educational institutions. Sandiko Rosi et al., 2022 explained that the branding strategy carried out by school principals directly can increase the level of public trust in schools. Branding, in the context of educational leadership, is not just a marketing strategy, but it also becomes an integral part of the process of building legitimacy, reputation, and institutional image (AS, A. H., & Ulum, K., 2025).

Therefore, research on the role of personal branding of school principals is important to understand its influence on public perception and preferences towards educational institutions.

The phenomenon seen in SMAN 1 Praya Barat shows that the figure of the principal has a central role in shaping the image and attractiveness of educational institutions. In the midst of increasing competition between public schools in the West Praya area, the personality and personal branding strategy of the school principal has proven to be a determining factor in attracting public interest. School principals who are communicative, visionary, and active in building public relations through social activities and digital media are able to create parental trust and loyalty. This condition shows that people's preferences in choosing schools are now not only based on academic facilities or achievements, but also on the leadership image attached to the figure of the principal. This phenomenon strengthens the view that school principals play a role as brand ambassadors for educational institutions that influence public perception. The success of SMAN 1 Praya Barat in increasing the number of registrants and the institution's achievements reflect the power of effective personal branding. Thus, this phenomenon is an important basis for in-depth research on how the implementation of personal branding of school principals affects parents' preferences in choosing schools.

Empirical phenomena in Central Lombok show that the role of school principal figures is an important factor in people's preferences in choosing schools. Based on data from the NTB Education Office in 2022, the level of competition between schools in the West Praya area has increased sharply, while the number of students tends to be limited (NTB Provincial Education and Culture Office, 2022). People are now more selective, tending to choose schools led by school principals with a good, charismatic, and communicative image. This phenomenon indicates that the personal branding of school principals is a strategic element in maintaining the competitiveness of public schools in the regions.

The results of the researcher's initial observation on September 25, 2025 at SMAN 1 West Praya strengthen this phenomenon. Based on school data, the number of new student enrollees has increased significantly in the last four years: 308 enrollees in 2022, 216 in 2023, increasing to 317 in 2024, and jumping to 411 in 2025. With a total of 937 active students, SMAN 1 Praya Barat occupies the highest position compared to other public schools around it which have an average of only 400-500 students. The school also recorded a 100% graduation rate for three consecutive years and obtained academic and non-academic achievements at the provincial level, such as the NTB Science Olympiad, Pencak Silat, and Beleq Drum Arts.

Interviews on September 26, 2025 with several parents of new students showed that most of them chose SMAN 1 Praya Barat because of the principal figure who is known to be inspirational and communicative. Others cited school achievement and proximity to the location as additional reasons. Interestingly, almost all respondents admitted that they had known the principal through social media, community stories, or face-to-face meetings. Most stated that the principal figure was very influential in their decision to choose this school. These facts show that the personal branding of the school principal is a determining factor in building parental trust and preference for educational institutions.

In addition, the school is active in institutional branding activities such as socialization to the surrounding junior high schools and MTs, religious activities with the community, competitions between schools, and regular publications on official social media. The principal

is directly involved in the promotional activities and encourages all school residents to contribute to improving the image of the institution. This activity shows that the personal branding of the principal at SMAN 1 Praya Barat is not only formed naturally, but also managed systematically through policies and concrete actions in the field.

This empirical fact confirms that the principal figure with strong personal branding is the main differentiator between SMAN 1 Praya Barat and other schools around it. Although the facilities and curriculum are relatively similar, the principal's inspiring and visionary personality manages to attract the attention and trust of the public. This raises an important academic question: to what extent does the principal's personal branding affect parents' preferences in choosing a school? And can the image of the principal be a dominant factor compared to other variables such as facilities, location, or tuition fees?

Some previous research supports the importance of branding in the context of education. Nurbawani 2021 found that the principal's strategy in marketing educational services has a significant effect on public trust (Nurbawani, A., 2021). Wardani 2020 shows that leadership-based school branding is able to increase parental loyalty in private Islamic schools (Lestari, N., & Wardani, E. 2020). However, most of the research was conducted at private institutions in big cities. Studies of public schools in the regions, especially in West Nusa Tenggara, are still very limited. This is where the research gap of this research lies, which is to examine how the personal branding of public school principals affects the preferences of parents in the local area.

The research also has a theoretical novelty, as it integrates three frameworks of thought: personal branding theory (Montoya), consumer preference theory (Kotler & Keller), and educational leadership theory (Bush). Phenomenological approaches are used to explore parents' subjective experiences in deciding on a school for their child. The focus of the research on the context of SMAN 1 Praya Barat makes it relevant and unique, because it raises the issue of educational leadership in the context of a region with a high level of competition in public schools.

Theoretically, this research enriches the treasure of literature on educational branding that is integrated with school leadership. Practically, the results of this research can be a reflection material for school principals in managing self-image and public communication based on values, competencies, and morals. Socially, this research provides an understanding for the public about the importance of the figure of school principals in determining the quality of educational institutions. Meanwhile, spiritually, this research emphasizes the importance of moral leadership in building trust and blessings of educational institutions.

This research is relevant to Islamic Education Management because it examines the practice of educational leadership (*al-qiyādah al-tarbawīyyah*) which is based on the values of trust, morals, and responsibility (*al-mas'ūliyyah*) in the management of educational institutions. Islamic education management is not only limited to faith-based schools, but emphasizes the application of Islamic values in the management process (*al-idārah*) and educational leadership universally (Nadilah, T., Yasmini, Y., Amilda, & Junaidah, 2025). The personal branding of the principal in this study is the embodiment of exemplary (*uswah hasanah*), honesty (*ṣidq*), and efforts to build public trust (*thiqqah*) through attitudes, communication, and leadership policies. Therefore, even though the research was conducted in public schools, this study is still in the realm of Islamic Education Management because it examines the values, ethics, and practices of educational

leadership that are in line with Islamic principles in building trust and quality of educational institutions.

Thus, the research entitled "*The Role of School Principals' Personal Branding on Parental Preferences in Choosing Schools at SMAN 1 Praya Barat*" has a high academic, social, and practical urgency. This research is able to make a scientific and empirical contribution to the development of Islamic education management, especially in the aspects of leadership, institutional image, and the relationship between schools and the community.

## Methods

The type in this article is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research was chosen because the main focus of this study is to understand the meaning, experience, and subjective interpretation of parents of the principal's personal branding in the decision-making process of choosing a school. In qualitative research, the researcher plays the role of the main instrument (human instrument).

In qualitative research, data sources are all forms of information that can provide a real and meaningful picture of the phenomenon being researched. According to (Moleong, 2019), data sources are subjects or objects from which data is obtained, either in the form of words, actions, documents, or phenomena that are directly observed. The data sources in this study are, Primary data sources are taken from school principals, deputy principals, teachers, parents of students, school committees, and community leaders. Meanwhile, the secondary data sources in this study are school profiles, annual reports, data on the number of students, academic and non-academic achievements. Archive of publication of school activities on social media, official school websites, and local media. Education policy document related to the competence of school principals (Permendikbud Number 6 of 2018). Academic literature such as books, journals, previous research results, and laws and regulations that support the theory of *personal branding* and *parental preferences in education*.

The data collection technique in this study aims to obtain valid and relevant data in the field (Scott, 2016). This qualitative research uses three techniques, namely interview, observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted directly with the principal as well as supporting informants relevant to the focus of the research. Observations are made through direct observation of environment of SMAN 1 West Praya with the aim of systematically observing the behavior, communication patterns, and activities of principals, teachers, and interactions with the community. Document collection is carried out systematically, starting from requesting official permission from the school, archiving digital and printed data, and verifying the authenticity of documents. All documents obtained were analyzed to identify empirical evidence of the practice *Personal Branding* school principals and their influence on public perceptions and preferences.

Data analysis in qualitative research is *simultaneous* with the data collection process and continues intensively after all data is collected. This simultaneous approach allows researchers to make *constant comparisons* between initial findings and new data so that the sampling, collection, and analysis processes enrich each other until *data saturation* is achieved. To maintain the systematics and transparency of the analysis, this study adapts the data analysis model (Miles &

Huberman, 1994) which consists of three main stages: (1) *data reduction*, (2) *data display*, and (3) *conclusion drawing and verification*.

## Results

### Implementation of Personal Branding for Principals at SMAN 1 West Praya

#### *Forms of Personal Branding of School Principals*

Forms of personal branding of school principals as they appear and are experienced in daily leadership practices at SMAN 1 West Praya. Data were obtained from in-depth interviews with principals, vice principals, and teachers, and were reinforced by the results of field observations and initial research documentation. In a phenomenological approach, personal branding is understood as a phenomenon that is present through the actions, relationships, communication, and social presence of the principal, not as a mere abstract concept. Based on field data, the form of personal branding of school principals can be grouped into four main principles, namely specialization, leadership, personality, and distinctiveness.

**Specialization:** Focus on Humanist-Religious Leadership Excellence. The first form of personal branding that stands out is the principal's specialization in humanist leadership based on religious values. This specialization is not formally stated as a slogan, but appears consistent in day-to-day leadership practice. In an interview, the principal said that he did not specifically "create" a specific brand, but rather underwent leadership based on the values he believed. The principal stated: "Personal branding for me grows from everyday life. The way I greet teachers, joke with students, and direct staff is my image. This statement shows that the principal's specialization lies in a personal and relational approach to leading. The findings of the study show that the principal's personal branding specialty lies in a combination of humanist and religious leadership. This excellence is reflected in empathic interpersonal relationships, strengthening moral values, and habituating school culture based on religious values. This specialization is a distinguishing feature that makes the figure of the principal easily recognized and distinguished from other school leaders in the midst of competition between educational institutions.

**Leadership:** Calm, communicative, and exemplary leadership. The next form of personal branding is seen in the leadership style that is consistently perceived by various informants. The leadership of the principal is described as calm, communicative, and direct example, not leadership that emphasizes authority alone. The Vice Principal described that the principal rarely uses an emotional approach in solving problems, preferring communication and rational explanations: "He is very calm and not easily emotional. The decision is explained logically so that the teacher can understand

In field observations, researchers noted that the principal actively greets students in class and interacts directly with the teacher, not only through official forums. This practice shows that the principal's leadership is perceived as present leadership, where the leader does not maintain structural distance, but is directly involved in school life. Leadership principles are manifested through a calm, communicative, and exemplary-oriented leadership style. The principal does not display authority through pressure or harsh control, but rather through rational

communication and example behavior. This leadership model makes school residents not only obedient, but also trust and feel safe in carrying out their duties and responsibilities.

**Personality:** Friendly, Humorous, Religious, and Unemotional. The personality aspect is one of the most powerful forms of personal branding that emerges from field data. Almost all informants mentioned the personal character of the school principal in a relatively uniform manner, indicating a stable collective perception. The teacher said that the principal was known to be friendly and humorous, but maintained firmness in his decisions: "He was very friendly and humorous, but still firm" The Deputy Principal also emphasized that the principal's friendliness and calmness were the most prominent traits: "His friendliness was extraordinary. He is very calm and not easily emotional"

Religious personality is also an important part of the principal's self-image. The teacher said that the principal consistently reminded the principal of worship and built a religious culture in the school This was strengthened by the results of observations that showed the active involvement of the principal in the religious activities of the school and the community. In the context of personal branding, this personality is the main source of trust and comfort, because the principal is perceived as an emotionally and morally stable figure. This personality creates a warm and inclusive work atmosphere, while also reinforcing trust due to its consistency across situations. A stable personality makes personal branding more authentic and durable, because the public captures the compatibility between personal character and leadership behavior.

**Distinctiveness: Social Presence and Consistency of Attitude.** The last form of personal branding that emerged from the field data was the uniqueness (distinctiveness) of the principal compared to other school leader figures. This uniqueness lies in the combination of a strong social presence and consistency of attitude in various situations. Based on observations, school principals are very active in social, government, community, and religious activities. This presence makes the principal widely known by the surrounding community, not only as a school official, but as an educational figure who is close to the residents. In the interview, the principal emphasized the importance of consistency as part of himself: "I remain my humorous but professional self. Decisions must be in line with actions. I keep calm and religiosity as the basis of behavior."

In addition, the use of social media as a means of publication of school activities is also unique. The principal is directly involved in the publication of positive school activities through official social media, which the Vice Principal refers to as a "showcase of school activities" The results of observations also show that the principal is classified as very active in social media and public publications. This uniqueness distinguishes the principal from a leader figure who is socially passive or closed in communication, thereby strengthening personal branding as a leader who is present, open, and consistent. The uniqueness of the principal's personal branding can be seen in the high social presence in the community and the consistency of attitudes in various contexts. The principal is easily recognizable as a representative of the school because he is active in socio-religious activities and shows consistent behavior between the school's internal space and the public space. This distinctiveness makes personal branding not only different, but also proven and experienced directly by school residents and the community.

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*Parents' Preferences in Choosing a School*

Parents' preferences in choosing SMAN 1 Praya Barat are formed through social experiences, collective perceptions, and value considerations that develop in the community. These preferences do not appear as an instant decision, but as the result of a multi-layered process of meaning, influenced by parents' interaction with the social environment, school figures, and the information they obtain both directly and through the media. In a phenomenological approach, parents' decisions are understood as a reflection of their life experiences and expectations for the child's future, so that the exposure of this data emphasizes how parents experience and interpret the existence of SMAN 1 Praya Barat as an educational institution.

One of the earliest dimensions shaping parental preferences is school beliefs and image. Parents view SMAN 1 Praya Barat as a school that has a positive and trustworthy reputation. This perception develops from the stories and social experiences of the community, not just from formal information. The school committee said that the principal was widely known as a polite and down-to-earth figure, so his existence gave a sense of calm to the community. The school committee said that the principal was perceived as a "calming figure" and "known to be polite and very down-to-earth" in the social life of the surrounding community. This perception shows that the image of the school is strongly attached to a stable and trustworthy leadership figure.

In addition to image and trust, parental preferences are also shaped by consideration of the quality of educational services. Parents interpret the quality of educational services broadly, not limited to physical facilities or academic achievements, but include discipline, order, and a conducive learning atmosphere. The school committee emphasized that: Discipline at SMAN 1 Praya Barat is very much felt in daily school life. Parents also said that the "school environment is safe and disciplined", so that they feel calmer when their children attend SMAN 1 Praya Barat

Another dimension that stands out very prominently in parental preferences is the proximity of values and beliefs between school and family. Parents emphasized the importance of schools that are able to instill moral and religious values that are in line with family values. In interviews, parents explicitly mentioned that the principal was perceived as religious and moral, so they felt confident that their children were in a morally safe environment. The school committee also affirmed that: "The principal is "religious and moral" and actively present in the religious activities of the community, which reinforces the impression that Islamic and moral values are practiced in a tangible and not merely symbolic manner.

The conformity of these values is a source of peace of mind for parents, because schools are seen not only as a place of academic learning, but also as a space for character formation. Parents interpret the principal's religiosity as a representation of the school culture as a whole. Thus, parental preferences are formed from the belief that SMAN 1 Praya Barat is able to be a family partner in guiding children to develop intellectually as well as morally.

Parental preferences are also significantly influenced by the social and communication influences that develop in the community. Parents admitted that they knew SMAN 1 Praya Barat and the principal through the stories of neighbors, families, and community leaders. Some parents said: "I often see the principal in village and religious activities". So that they get to know the figure before their child registers for school. Parents also mentioned that positive

information about schools was derived from "community stories" and "other parents' experiences," which then formed a collective belief. In addition to direct social communication, school social media is an important information channel for parents. Parents said that they "saw posts of school activities" through the official social media of SMAN 1 West Praya.

Overall, the findings of this study show that parents' preferences in choosing SMAN 1 Praya Barat are formed through five main themes that are intertwined, namely trust and image of the school, quality of educational services, conformity of values and beliefs, social and communication influences, and positive perceptions of the principal's leadership. The five themes do not stand alone, but form a whole unity of social experiences in the decision-making process of parents.

A secondary finding that also emerged was that parental preferences tended to be cumulative and long-term, rather than momentary decisions. Parents not only consider the current condition of the school, but also the sustainability of the educational environment for children for the next three years. This shows that parental preferences are influenced by the stability and consistency of the school, especially the consistency of the school's leadership and culture.

### **The Implications of Principal's Personal Branding in Influencing Parents' Preferences at SMAN 1 Praya Barat**

#### *Principal's Professional Competence*

The data exposure shows that the professional competence of the principal of SMAN 1 Praya Barat is strongly perceived through the school's real performance. Based on the results of the initial observation of the research, the school showed high management stability and competitiveness. The number of applicants has increased from 308 students in 2022 to 411 students in 2025, with the number of active students reaching 937 people, higher than other public schools in the surrounding area which have an average of only 400-500 students. This achievement is perceived by the public as an indicator of the managerial success of the school principal. From the academic and non-academic sides, the observation results recorded that the student graduation rate reached 100% over the past three years, accompanied by academic achievements in the form of the NTB Provincial level Olympics as well as non-academic achievements such as pencak silat and beleq drum art.

This data shows that the professional competence of school principals is not only seen in administrative management, but also in the real results felt by students and the community. The school committee considers that this success is inseparable from the vision and leadership ability of the principal in managing school resources. One of the school committee statements stated that: "the principal has the ability to manage the school in a directed and consistent manner, so that the school program runs stably and sustainably". This perception strengthens the image of the principal as a professional leader who understands the managerial and strategic aspects of the educational institution.

#### *Integrity and Morality of School Principals*

The integrity and morality of the principal emerged as a very strong aspect of personal branding in data exposure. The school committee and parents consistently portray the principal

as a polite, honest, and religious figure. The school committee said that: "My principal *knows him to be polite and very down-to-earth* and to *be present at religious events*" This shows that moral and religious values are not only spoken, but lived in daily life.

Parents of students also affirm this dimension of morality. One of the parents said that the principal was "*religious*" and "*very friendly and not grumpy*", thus creating a sense of security and trust in entrusting the child's education at school. This expression shows that the integrity of the principal is felt directly in social interactions, not only indirectly known.

#### *Public Communication of the Principal*

The principal's public communication skills are an important element in the formation of personal branding. The school committee said that the principal was "*communicative and easy to meet*" and "*there was no distance from the community*" in interacting. This statement shows that the principal is perceived to be open to dialogue and input from various parties. Community leaders also consider that the principal is a friendly, sociable, and calm figure in dealing with social problems. One of the community leaders said that the principal was "*friendly and sociable*" and "*calm and not emotional*" when interacting with the community. This shows that the principal's public communication is inclusive and not authoritarian.

#### *Principal's Image and Reputation*

The image and reputation of the principal are formed from the accumulation of the community's social experience of his leadership. Based on the results of observations, the general impression of the principal includes *a firm and visionary character, religious and humble, friendly and communicative, and disciplined and professional*. This perception appears consistently in the informant's narrative, indicating the existence of a stable reputation. The parents of the students assessed the image of the principal as "*very kind, friendly and humorous*", and stated that the figure of the principal was "*very influential*" in the decision to choose SMAN 1 Praya Barat. This shows that the reputation of the principal is not only personal, but also has a direct impact on the school's image.

The reputation of the school principal is also reflected in the increase in public trust in the school. Observations show that public interest in schools continues to increase, which is attributed by the community to the success of the principal's leadership. Thus, the image of the principal serves as a reputation capital that strengthens the school's attractiveness in the eyes of the public.

#### *Consistency of Values and Actions of Principals*

Consistency between values and actions is the main foundation of the principal's personal branding. The school committee emphasized that the principal's discipline is very felt and applied consistently in school life. The principal is perceived not only to demand discipline from teachers and students, but also to display this discipline in personal behavior. The vice principal emphasized that consistency of attitude is the principal's main strategy, and he uses social media as a "showcase for school activities." The principal himself affirmed that consistency in a very strong phrase: "*The decision must be in line with my actions of keeping calm and religiosity as the basis of behavior.*"

This consistency is important because for parents, a positive image will be considered credible if they see a fit between the leader's speech, actions at school, and behavior in society. The consistency of the actions is also seen in the observation data regarding the involvement of school principals in institutional branding. Observations noted that the school has official publication media (website, Facebook, Instagram), annual promotional activities (socialization to junior high schools, religious activities with the community, inter-school competitions, social media publications), and the principal is considered "very active" to be involved in promotion/publication and support teachers through the provision of rewards. These findings confirm that the contribution of personal branding is not only "natural", but also managed through consistent organizational actions, so that the reputation of the principal and the school reinforce each other in the long run.

## Discussion

So far, the personal branding theory put forward by Montoya emphasizes aspects of specialization, leadership, personality, and uniqueness as factors that shape personal image. However, the findings of this study show that in school leadership practice, the four principles have not fully explained the direction and sustainability of personal branding without a visionary dimension that serves as a strategic direction. These findings are in line with the contemporary educational leadership literature that places vision at the core of effective leadership. Research shows that school leaders who have a visionary orientation are able to build shared direction, increase the commitment of school residents, and strengthen the institution's reputation in an ongoing manner (Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D., 2020). In the context of branding, vision serves as a strategic narrative that connects the leader's identity with institutional goals, so that the image of leadership becomes more meaningful and trustworthy.

The findings of the study show that parental preferences are formed through a combination of trust in the image of the school, the quality of educational services, the suitability of values and beliefs, the influence of social communication, and perception of the leadership of the principal. This pattern is in line with *contemporary school choice* theory which asserts that parents' decisions in choosing schools are not solely determined by rational-economic factors, but also by social factors, values, and beliefs (*trust-based choice*). Recent research shows that school reputation and public trust are important determinants in parental decisions, especially in the context of secondary education (Pratama, R., & Anggrainie, N., 2022).

The results of this study also corroborate the findings (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2022) that school reputation is social capital built through the collective experience of the community, not just through formal promotion. However, this study shows a distinctive contextual nuance, namely the strong role of direct social relations and religious values in shaping reputation. In contrast to the urban context that emphasizes digital branding strategies and academic performance, the West Praya context shows that the presence of school principals in social and religious activities has a greater influence on parental preferences.

The most prominent aspect of the discussion is the role of the principal's leadership in shaping parental preferences. The findings of the study show that the principal is perceived as the main representation of the school's image. This perception supports the *principal-centered leadership* theory, which states that the principal is a symbolic figure who represents the values,

direction, and quality of educational institutions in the eyes of the public (Kamalia, 2025). Recent research also shows that the principal's leadership style that is communicative, humanist, and moral affects parental trust and community involvement with schools (Widodo, R. (2025). Thus, the findings of this study strengthen the position of school principals as strategic actors in building public trust and parental preferences.

If it is associated with the initial suspicion that the principal's personal branding is intertwined with parental preferences, then the results of this study support this allegation. Parents' preferences are not only influenced by the school's structural factors, but also by the personal image of the principal which is perceived as positive, consistent, and in accordance with societal values. This shows that there is a conceptual continuity between Chapter II and Chapter III, where the principal's personal branding serves as a social bridge that connects the school with parental beliefs and choices.

The results of the study show that the personal branding of the principal at SMAN 1 Praya Barat operates through a combination of professional competence, moral integrity, public communication, image-reputation, and consistency of values. These findings support a symbolic and relational leadership approach, which views school leaders not just as administrative managers, but as representations of values, identities, and institutional direction. (Bush and Glover, 2020) affirm that the principal functions as a symbolic figure that influences public perception of the quality and credibility of the school. In the context of this research, the symbolization is realized through leadership behavior that is consistent and easily recognized by the community.

From the perspective of Islamic Education Management, these findings emphasize the relevance of *value-based leadership*. The integrity, morality, and religiosity of the principal not only serve as normative principles, but also become a source of leadership legitimacy and public trust. Research (Baharun and Awwaliyah, 2023) shows that parents' trust in Islamic educational institutions is greatly influenced by the perception of the moral and trust of leaders. The findings of this study are consistent with this view, even in the context of public schools, where religious values remain the main consideration of parental preferences.

## Conclusion

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the principal's personal branding, parents' preferences in choosing a school, and the contribution of the principal's personal branding to parents' preferences in SMAN 1 West Praya. Based on the results of qualitative data analysis with a phenomenological approach, this study concludes that the principal's personal branding is not a formally designed branding strategy, but rather grows naturally from consistent, valuable, and socially meaningful daily leadership practices.

The implementation of the principal's personal branding is realized through humanist-religious leadership, a calm and communicative leadership style, a friendly and emotionally stable personality, and uniqueness in the form of social presence and the use of school publication media. The principal's personal branding is formed as a result of continuous interaction between the leader's behavior and the experiences of school residents and the community, so that the image that appears is perceived as authentic and trustworthy.

Parents' preferences in choosing SMAN 1 Praya Barat are shaped by five main dimensions, namely the school's trust and image, the quality of educational services, the suitability of moral and religious values, social influence and communication, and perception of the principal's leadership. Parental preferences are not purely rational-administrative, but are the result of social meanings that combine emotional considerations, values, and collective experiences.

The personal branding of the principal has significant implications in shaping and strengthening parental preferences. Such contributions work through mechanisms of trust, social visibility, and consistency of actions, where the principal is perceived as a direct representation of the school's quality and safety. Thus, the personal branding of the principal becomes a strategic bridge between educational leadership and public trust.

This study concludes that the personal branding of school principals has a central role in building the image of the school and influencing parental preferences, especially in the context of public schools that are in a social environment with strong ties of values and religiosity. These findings support the research objectives and reinforce the view that educational leadership cannot be separated from the social, moral, and relational dimensions.

However, this study has limitations, among other things, it was conducted in a single school with a specific social context and uses a qualitative-phenomenological approach that emphasizes depth of meaning, rather than statistical generalization. These limitations need to be considered in interpreting and applying research results.

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