



DIGITAL BRANDING STRATEGY OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS TO INCREASE APPLICANT INTEREST (A CASE STUDY AT SD IT AND TK IT USMAN BIN AFFAN)

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Abstract

This study examines the digital branding strategy implemented by an Islamic educational institution, Ma'had Usman Bin Affan (comprising SDIT and TK IT Usman Bin Affan), in increasing the interest of prospective students. The research aims to describe how the institution plans, implements, and evaluates its branding strategy, and to identify the digital platforms that most effectively support promotion. A qualitative case study approach was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews with the principal of SDIT Usman Bin Affan, the principal of TK IT Utsman Bin Affan, and a parent of enrolled students, followed by thematic reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results show that the institution builds its brand identity around the vision of forming a "Qur'anic generation" through flagship programs of Tahfiz Al-Qur'an and religious habituation, supported by internal coordination, quality control through classroom supervision, and structured complaint handling. Digital branding is carried out through official social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) as well as teachers' personal accounts, which significantly expand promotional reach. Parental trust is reinforced by authentic content, testimonials, and word of mouth. The institution reported a substantial increase in the number of new registrants, evidenced by the opening of additional classes and the early fulfillment of enrollment quotas. The study concludes that digital branding, when integrated with genuine academic quality and responsive service, is an effective strategy for strengthening institutional image and increasing enrollment interest in Islamic educational institutions.

Keywords *Digital Branding, Brand Image, Educational Marketing, Enrollment Interest, Islamic Educational Institution*

INTRODUCTION

Competition among educational institutions particularly Islamic ones has intensified due to the growing number of school choices and high public expectations regarding educational quality. Under these circumstances, institutions can no longer rely solely on academic excellence; they must also effectively communicate their strengths to the public. A strategy widely adopted today is digital branding: the effort to build and communicate an institution's identity and image via digital platforms such as social media, websites, and instant messaging apps (Rowles, 2014). Digital branding enables institutions to reach prospective parents more broadly, quickly, and cost-effectively than conventional promotional methods.

Kotler and Fox (1995) assert that educational institutions are essentially entities that engage in marketing (educational marketing), even though their offerings are intangible services. In this context, branding serves as a strategic tool to differentiate an institution from others offering similar services. Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model explains that brand strength is built through four stages: brand identity

(how the institution is recognized), brand meaning (what the institution represents), brand response (public perception and evaluation), and brand resonance (customer loyalty and emotional attachment). This model is relevant for analyzing how educational institutions build public trust through digital branding strategies.

Ma'had Usman Bin Affan which oversees TK IT Utsman Bin Affan (kindergarten) and SDIT Usman Bin Affan (elementary school) is an Islamic educational institution that actively utilizes social media for promotion and to build an institutional image grounded in the values of the Qur'an and Sunnah. A compelling finding from the preliminary study is the high level of interest from new applicants in recent years; this is evidenced by the opening of additional classes and the filling of enrollment quotas much earlier than at neighboring institutions. This situation raises questions regarding the digital branding strategies employed by the institution to generate such a significant increase in applicant interest.

METHODS

Research Design and Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, which aims to explore deeply a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study was chosen because this research seeks to fully understand how the digital branding strategy is carried out by Ma'had Usman Bin Affan as a single unit of analysis, covering the perspectives of the institution's management as well as direct beneficiaries, namely the students' parents/guardians.

Data Sources and Informants

Research data were obtained from three key informants, namely the Principal of SDIT (Integrated Islamic Elementary School) Usman Bin Affan, the Principal of TK IT (Integrated Islamic Kindergarten) Utsman Bin Affan, and a parent who has two children attending SDIT Usman Bin Affan. The selection of informants was carried out using purposive sampling with the consideration that all three have direct involvement and knowledge of the planning, implementation, and reception processes of the institution's branding strategy.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using semi-structured interview guidelines. The collected data were then analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) which includes three stages: data reduction (sorting relevant information from interview transcripts), data display (grouping findings into major themes), and drawing conclusions/verification. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation, namely comparing information from the institution's management (principals) with the service recipients (parents).

Table 1 below presents a summary of informant profiles along with key findings that form the basis of the analysis in the results section.

Table 1.
Summary of Informant Profiles and Key Interview Findings

No.	Informant	Summary of Key Findings
1	Principal of SDIT Usman Bin Affan	The branding strategy is carried out through four stages: identity planning ("Qur'anic Generation"), internal-external socialization, implementation of flagship programs, and periodic evaluation/quality control.
2	Principal of TK IT Utsman Bin Affan	Digital branding is carried out through the institution's official accounts (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram) reinforced by 9 teachers acting as information dissemination agents through their respective personal accounts.
3	Parent of 2nd & 3rd Grade Students at SDIT Usman Bin Affan	The Tahfiz Al-Qur'an program, discipline, and guidance from the ustadz/ustazah (teachers) are the main attractions; trust is built from testimonials and social media content which is considered aesthetic and informative.

RESULTS

1. Planning and Implementation of Branding Strategy

The results of interviews with the Principal of SDIT Usman Bin Affan show that the institution's branding strategy is implemented through four systematic stages. The first stage is planning and identity determination, which involves establishing the image to be built in the community, one of which is through the vision of realizing a "Qur'anic Generation". The second stage is socialization, both internally to the board of management and teachers, and externally to the community, to align perceptions of the established identity. The third stage is program implementation, namely selling the school's attractions and flagship programs to prospective parents. The fourth stage is evaluation, in the form of quality control over obstacles that arise in the field. Coordination among parties is carried out through formal monthly meetings with the foundation and weekly briefings that take place in an informal atmosphere with the board of teachers.

2. Flagship Programs as the Core of the Institution's Brand

Both principals agreed that the Tahfiz Al-Qur'an program and early worship guidance are the core of the institution's brand. At the SDIT level, the memorization target is set measurably, namely a minimum of 1 juz in grade 1 up to 5 juz upon graduation in grade 6. At the TK IT level, children are accustomed to reading the Qur'an, memorizing short surahs, practicing daily prayers, dhikr, and supplications, which are balanced with the Merdeka Curriculum. Findings from parents reinforce this: the Tahfiz Al-Qur'an program and guidance from the ustadz/ustazah are the main reasons parents continue to choose the school even though the distance from their homes is quite far.

3. Utilization of Digital Platforms in Branding

Both levels of education at Ma'had Usman Bin Affan actively utilize digital channels. SDIT Usman Bin Affan optimizes Facebook to display school programs, Instagram as a visual medium, and YouTube for live streaming and uploading activity videos. Meanwhile, TK IT Utsman Bin Affan has official accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, reinforced by an empowerment strategy of nine teachers to help disseminate information on learning activities through their respective personal social media accounts. This strategy has proven to significantly expand the promotional reach. Content publication focuses on tangible evidence of student achievements, such as the ability to memorize the Qur'an, prayer habituation, and independence in worship, as a form of proving quality to prospective parents.

4. Evaluation, Quality Control, and Response to Complaints

Service quality is maintained through routine class supervision by the principal to monitor the teachers' teaching process and students' memorization progress. Regarding parent complaints, the school applies a quick response procedure, namely direct clarification to the relevant students and homeroom teachers, then formulating a joint solution. The school also periodically distributes satisfaction surveys to parents. At the TK IT level, a similar mechanism is carried out through routine deliberation forums with parents to present program developments and openly accommodate aspirations.

5. Parents' Perceptions and Experiences

Parents stated that their initial impression of the school was obtained from recommendations of other parents and direct visits to the school location. Trust in the quality of education is strengthened by alumni testimonials who on average are able to memorize up to 5 juz of the Qur'an. Parents consider the school's social media content to be very positive, namely simple, aesthetic, informative, and relatable to the community. They stated that digital information in the form of photos, activity videos, and testimonials greatly influenced their decision to enroll or recommend the school to others. However, parents also noted a decrease in the transparency of weekly reports on children's memorization/learning at the elementary level compared to the kindergarten period, and hope that the digital reporting system can be reactivated.

6. Challenges in the Implementation of Digital Branding

Several challenges were identified from the interview results. At the SDIT level, the main challenges are internal, namely aligning the perceptions of all staff and teachers, and external challenges in the form of fierce competition with other schools. At the TK IT level, the obstacles faced are more technical, namely short learning durations and limited digital facilities, where only one Digital Information Board (PID) unit is available to serve five learning groups, so its use must be rotated among classes. In addition, parents highlighted the need to improve content distribution, for example through WhatsApp Statuses and Parent WhatsApp Groups, so that the information reach is wider.

7. Impact of Digital Branding on Applicants' Interest

Both principals assessed that digital branding has a significant impact on increasing the number of applicants. At SDIT Usman Bin Affan, the very rapid increase in grade 1 applicants caused the school to open four learning groups. At TK IT Utsman Bin Affan, the registration quota for new students had been fulfilled since January, much earlier than other schools which generally only open registration in June-July. Annual recapitulation data also shows an upward trend in the number of applicants from year to year.

DISCUSSION

1. Digital Branding as a Strategy to Build Brand Awareness

The research findings show that Ma'had Usman Bin Affan builds brand awareness through the use of multi-channel social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) reinforced by teacher participation as promotional agents through personal accounts. This strategy is in line with the concept of digital branding proposed by Rowles (2014), which emphasizes the importance of message consistency across channels to strengthen brand recognition. The involvement of teachers as information disseminators also reflects Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) principle regarding the participatory nature of social media, where promotional reach no longer depends on one official account, but on a wider and more personally trusted individual social network.

2. Flagship Programs and Quality-Based Brand Image

The consistency between flagship programs (Tahfiz Al-Qur'an and worship guidance) and published content is the key to forming a credible brand image. This is in accordance with the brand-meaning stage in the Customer-Based Brand Equity model (Keller, 1993), where a strong brand image must be based on actual performance, not just promotional claims. The publication of concrete evidence, such as memorization progress and children's independence in worship, serves as performance association that strengthens prospective parents' trust in the institution's quality.

3. Word of Mouth and Trust as Enhancers of Brand Resonance

The finding that parents actively recommend the school to family and neighbors shows the achievement of the brand resonance stage, which is the highest level of loyalty and emotional attachment in Keller's (1993) model. This phenomenon also confirms the relevance of the word-of-mouth concept (Godin, 2018) in the context of educational service marketing, where informal testimonials from satisfied customers prove to be one of the first and most trusted sources of information for prospective parents, even before the institution's digital content is accessed directly.

4. Service Quality and Information Transparency Challenges

Although the service quality is generally considered good by parents, the finding regarding the decrease in transparency of children's learning progress reports at the elementary level compared to kindergarten indicates a gap in the responsiveness and

reliability dimensions in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). This is important to note because, as emphasized by Chapleo (2010, 2011) in the context of educational institution branding, the consistency of service experience across all levels is a determining factor in the sustainability of customer trust in the institution's overall brand.

5. Effectiveness of Digital Branding on Increasing Applicant Interest

The significant increase in the number of applicants, marked by the opening of additional learning groups and the early fulfillment of registration quotas, confirms the effectiveness of digital branding as an educational marketing strategy (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). The digitalization of promotion has proven capable of reaching the community more widely and efficiently compared to conventional methods such as distributing printed brochures, while simultaneously accelerating the decision-making process of prospective parents through access to more transparent and evidence-based information.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the digital branding strategy implemented by Ma'had Usman Bin Affan is proven effective in increasing applicant interest. This effectiveness is built through four main pillars, namely: (1) systematic branding planning and implementation, starting from identity determination to periodic evaluation; (2) the Tahfiz Al-Qur'an program and worship guidance as the core of an authentic and measurable brand; (3) the utilization of multi-channel social media expanded through teacher participation as promotional agents; and (4) the strengthening of trust through testimonials, word of mouth, and concrete evidence of student achievements. The impact of this strategy is reflected in the significant increase in the number of applicants at both levels of education. However, this research also reveals the need for improvement in the transparency aspect of digital student progress reporting and the equal distribution of promotional content, so that service quality remains consistent and the institution's brand image can continue to be strengthened sustainably. Future research is recommended to develop a quantitative approach to measurably assess the contribution of each digital channel to enrollment decisions

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