

Optimizing Digital Branding to Strengthen Brand Identity in Islamic Schools: A Study of MAN 2 Tulungagung

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ABSTRACT. This study examines optimizing digital branding to enhance brand identity at Islamic educational institutions, specifically at MAN 2 Tulungagung. This research employs a qualitative approach. Data collection techniques include participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data analysis process involves data condensation, data display, and concluding. The findings indicate that digital branding is optimized through various digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, the official website, and WhatsApp Groups to reach a broader audience. Social media builds public awareness and interest in the school's strengths by presenting engaging and informative visual content. Moreover, the official website is a transparent and publicly accessible formal communication channel. This digital branding strategy has successfully increased the number of new applicants, especially in the school's flagship programs in arts and sports, which serve as the unique identity of MAN 2 Tulungagung. The school's brand identity is closely tied to its strong commitment to Islamic values, reflected in the curriculum and other flagship programs. However, digital branding optimization faces several challenges, including limited human resources—relying on only one staff member to manage multiple digital platforms—and internal coordination issues caused by sudden schedule changes. MAN 2 Tulungagung has planned training programs to address these challenges to improve staff competence in information technology management and strengthen their ability to operate various digital platforms effectively. This study has implications that optimizing branding digitalization can increase public awareness and interest in the excellence of *madrasahs*, thereby increasing the number of new registrants. However, there are challenges in its implementation, such as limited human resources and internal coordination.

Keywords: *Branding digitalization, Brand identity, Islamic educational institutions, Social media optimization*

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INTRODUCTION

The increasingly intense competition among educational institutions can be utilized as an opportunity to enhance the quality of education (Abdullah, 2016). By leveraging technological advancements and understanding the needs of society, *madrasahs* can enhance their quality and create a more conducive educational environment. Efforts made by *madrasahs* to improve their quality represent a positive step that reflects a strong commitment to continuous development. Even after gaining public trust, *madrasahs* must improve quality (Baharun & Hasanah, 2023). In the current digital era, *madrasahs* need to leverage technology to enhance their image and improve the quality of education.

A *madrasah* is a brand that must be strategically developed to attract parents' attention (Azizah & Halwati, 2023). In the era of Industry 4.0, *madrasahs* must utilize digital technology, such

as digital marketing, to promote their brand and achieve their institutional goals more effectively (Ranosa et al., 2023; Baharun & Mukarramah, 2023; Samroji, 2024). It technology encompasses automation, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things (IoT) (Cavalcante et al., 2016; Malik & Om, 2018), which can assist *madrasahs* in improving the quality and efficiency of information delivery to their stakeholders.

Madrasahs must be technologically literate and utilize technology to enhance their quality, particularly in the Internet of Things (IoT) era. Digital branding in *madrasahs* can help increase public awareness and broaden community access (Norman & Wahib, 2023). For instance, the digital branding efforts of [specific *madrasah*] have significantly increased their student enrollment and public perception. Through digital branding, *madrasahs* can position themselves as modern Islamic educational institutions responsive and adaptive to technological and social changes. Digital branding, a strategic use of digital media to shape public perception, is essential for *madrasahs* in today's digital era (Surahman & Fitria, 2023). Today, the public is more inclined to seek information about educational institutions through digital media rather than relying solely on recommendations from others (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Therefore, *madrasahs* need to establish a strong digital branding presence to enhance public awareness and trust.

In reality, it is unfortunate that many *madrasahs* have yet to optimize their institutional branding through social media platforms fully. *Madrasahs* can gain numerous benefits by engaging in institutional branding. The functions of madrasah branding include increasing public trust in the institution, building a quality image, serving as a promotional tool and a means of attracting public interest, fostering positive student behavior, enhancing service quality, and raising public interest and awareness (Noviani et al., 2023). The primary goal of madrasah branding is to build public trust through positive perception and to cultivate a sense of attachment and loyalty to the brand (Ghufron et al., 2023).

According to Kaplan (2020), brand identity refers to the unique brand associations that represent a promise to consumers. For brand identity to be effective, it must interact with consumers to shape their perceptions, differentiate the brand from its competitors, and serve as the foundation for future brand strategies. MAN 2 Tulungagung, formerly a private PGA (*Pendidikan Guru Agama*), has established a strong brand identity as a high-quality *Madrasah Aliyah Negeri* (MAN), focusing on the holistic development of students, both academically and non-academically. The institution demonstrates a strong commitment to Islamic values, which is reflected in its curriculum and school activities. MAN 2 Tulungagung strives to optimize students' potential in academic and non-academic fields, aiming to nurture individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and possess noble character.

Madrasah is crucial in educating, managing, and producing quality human resources. Thus, its graduates are expected to be helpful to and accepted by the community and well absorbed by the workforce. However, the lack of awareness of branding through digital marketing or social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, websites, and others can be a trigger that can become a problem in implementing branding at MAN 2 Tulungagung. This can also be seen from the lack of massive social media accounts owned if branding is done through social media. Social media accounts may always be massive for branding that can market schools. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for successfully implementing digital branding in *madrasahs*.

The branding of this madrasah itself not only plays a role in increasing the number of students but also the quality of students who will register and are interested in MAN 2 Tulungagung. The minimal awareness of the potential of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and even websites as practical tools in building a school image has become an obstacle that needs to be overcome immediately. The urgency of adapting to the digital era is paramount, as social media accounts that have not been utilized optimally reflect unpreparedness in the era of increasingly digitalized education.

Digital branding must still be continuously implemented, as its application varies across time and context (Mansyuri & Abidin, 2023). The importance of continuous implementation of digital branding cannot be overstated, as it requires ongoing commitment and adaptation to the changing technological landscape. Therefore, it is highly compelling to investigate madrasah branding in response to the rapid technological advancements in this digital era (Wahyunto et al., 2024). This research is important given that, in the internet-driven era of the industrial revolution, it is time for *madrasahs* to be encouraged to use digital media to enhance the quality of their institutions. The study is also conducted where *madrasahs* generally show less concern for digital media. Ironically, the need is greater and more urgent in those very institutions. According to the researcher, the push for utilizing digital media is essential, as today's society is more active in the virtual world than in the physical one. This is evidenced by discussions on social media about a particular issue that tends to develop much faster than those not amplified in the digital space.

MAN 2 Tulungagung possesses several distinctive features, including flagship programs such as Culinary Arts (*Tata Boga*), the *Ma'had Al-Furqon* boarding school, and the SATELIT application (*Sistem Administrasi Terpadu Madrasah Aliyah 2 Tulungagung*), which won first place in an innovation competition. The school's vision is to create an environment characterized by intelligence, dedication, innovation, competitiveness, and an Islamic spirit. Students at MAN 2 Tulungagung have achieved various national-level accomplishments, including first place in a digital poster design competition, eight awards in the Hamengkubuwono Cup Marching Band competition, third place in the LKBB flag-raising competition (*Pasukan Pengibar Bendera = Paskibra*), and multiple achievements in *Pencak Silat* (first, second, and third place). Both academic and non-academic achievements are accessible through social media platforms, reinforcing the school's brand identity and positively influencing public trust.

One of the benefits of madrasah branding is the improvement of educational quality; with a strong image and good reputation, a madrasah can attract high-quality prospective students (Maulana et al., 2022). In addition, madrasah branding can strengthen the institution's position within the community and build public trust in the madrasah (Ginting & Syaifuddin, (2023). However, madrasah branding is neither easy nor simple; it requires the right strategy and consistent efforts to build the institution's image and reputation. Madrasahs must reflect their identity, vision, and mission and identify distinctive strengths that set them apart from other madrasahs (Ejiofo et al., 2023). Because one of the main objectives of branding is to increase public awareness. The optimization of branding in the field of education is a strategic approach that madrasahs can employ to present themselves as quality institutions and to promote a positive image, thereby increasing public awareness of the institution. In this study, the researcher is particularly interested in examining the optimization of digital branding in enhancing brand identity at MAN 2 Tulungagung to provide insights and references for the development of madrasah branding to raise public awareness.

METHOD

Types of Research

Based on the location of its data sources, this research falls under the field research category. Field research aims to investigate the setting in which the events under study occur, thereby obtaining direct and up-to-date information on the relevant issues while also serving as a means of cross-checking previously available materials (Fitri & Haryanti, 2020). This research was conducted at MAN 2 Tulungagung. This research employs a case study approach based on selecting a research site that exhibits characteristics relevant to optimizing digital branding in enhancing brand identity at MAN 2 Tulungagung. Using this case study design, the information and data collected will be expected to provide a range of insights and experiences related to the research focus. From this site,

key findings regarding public relations management in building public trust can be drawn, which are of significant importance to digital branding and public relations.

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection procedure used in this study is participant observation. In this case, the researcher, as an active participant, systematically observes and records the phenomena that appear at MAN 2 Tulungagung. The observation technique applied in this research is participant observation. Participant observation aims to observe events as they naturally occur in the field. In this technique, the researcher involves or interacts directly with the activities carried out by the subject by systematically collecting the required data through an in-depth interview. The interview method for this research is used as a guideline in conducting the study. In this case, the researcher uses the in-depth interview technique to explore detailed information regarding the optimization of digital branding in enhancing brand identity. The researcher will interview informants such as supervisors, administrators, and others. Documentation. The documents referred to may include photographs, madrasah documents, interview transcripts, and documents about the history and development of the madrasah. All these documents will be collected for analysis to complete the research data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is the process of systematically searching for and arranging data obtained from interviews, field notes, and other materials so that the information can be easily communicated to others. The purpose of this analysis is to extract meaningful insights and conclusions from the collected data. Data analysis involves systematically organizing and interpreting interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials collected by the researcher. As this research employs a case study design, the data analysis is carried out in three stages: data condensation, data display, verification, and conclusion drawing (Basyit, 2019). Then, it is verified with valid and consistent evidence to obtain a credible conclusion. The research method should be included in the Introduction. The method explains the research approach, study subjects, the research procedure's conduct, materials and instruments, data collection, and analysis techniques.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Optimization of Branding Digitalization through Social Media

Educational institutions strive to build a positive image to attract prospective students. When someone chooses a product, their decision is influenced not only by necessity but also by the image projected by the institution. Therefore, providing information to the public becomes essential for organizations in shaping a positive image. This description can also be interpreted as an image that must be maintained or even enhanced through social media. The branding process for madrasahs is beneficial in helping prospective students find educational institutions that align with their needs. This branding involves the selection of promises, values, and elements that reflect the identity of the madrasah. Thus, branding efforts by madrasahs aim to attract public attention and become the community's preferred choice.

MAN 2 Tulungagung utilizes information technology comprehensively to build a strong brand identity. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are an essential part of this strategy. Through engaging visual content, Instagram publishes routine activities, student achievements, and flagship programs. TikTok, which targets the younger generation, fosters audience engagement through creative and informative short videos. As revealed in an interview with the head of the madrasah: "*Social media is used to build a strong madrasah brand by utilizing information*

technology such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube so that the public can access it, enabling them to follow the programs and activities, which ultimately enhances public trust."

Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube platforms not only enhance public awareness but also extend the reach of information beyond the Malang City area. In addition to social media, the official website of the madrasah serves as a reliable formal communication tool. This website is an information hub, providing details about extracurricular programs, academic achievements, and new student enrollment procedures. Regular updates on the website ensure transparency and facilitate public access to important madrasah-related information. WhatsApp Groups also play a crucial role in the communication strategy. This platform delivers both internal and external information quickly and directly. Parent WhatsApp groups facilitate discussions about madrasah activities, schedules, and important announcements. The effectiveness of this medium lies in its ability to reduce the risk of miscommunication and strengthen the relationship between the madrasah and its community.

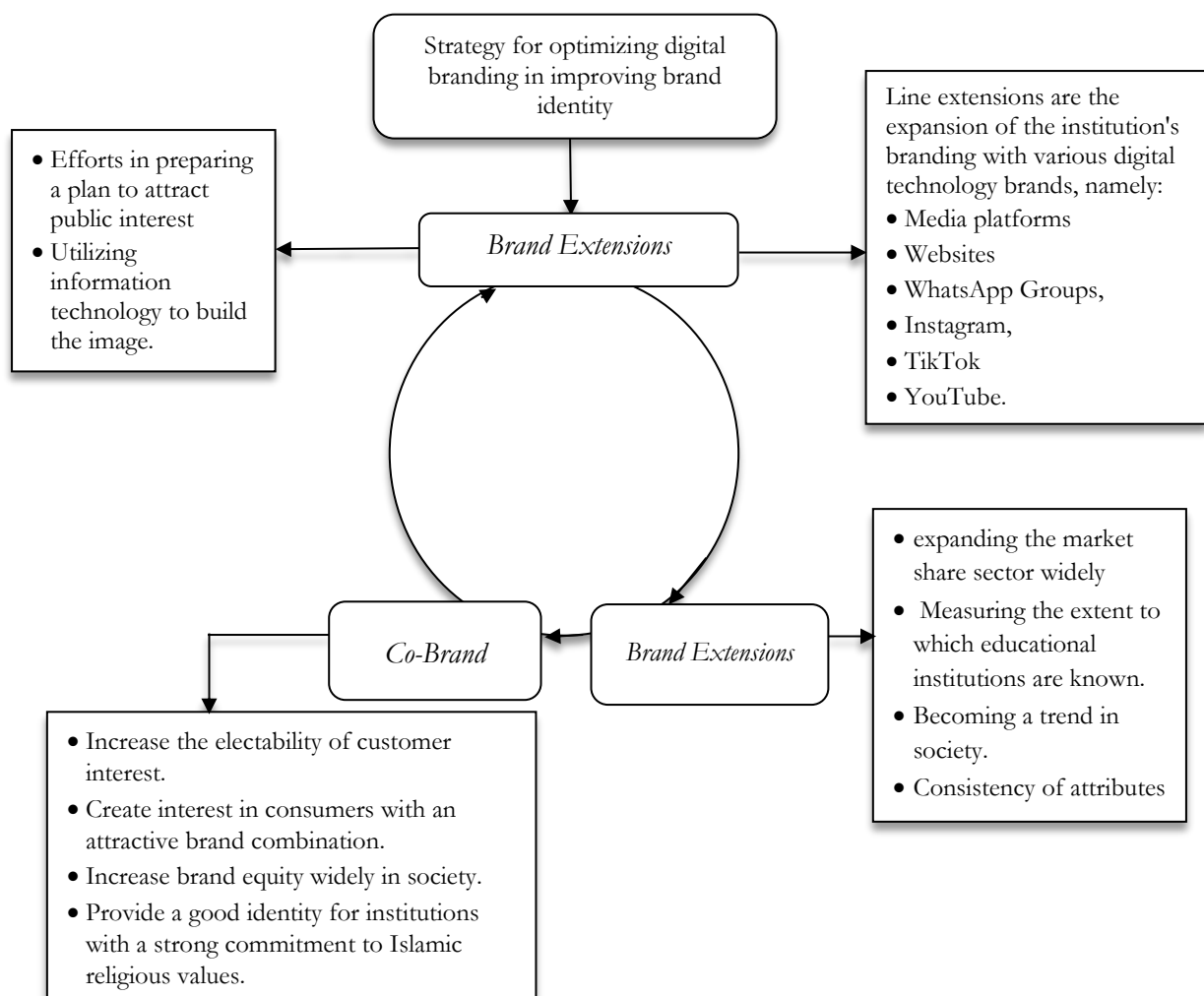


Figure 1. Strategy for optimizing digital branding in improving brand identity

The strategy for optimizing digital branding to enhance brand identity, as part of an effort to prepare a plan aimed at attracting public interest or prospective students at MAN 2 Tulungagung, is presented in the form of the following descriptive data: One of the strategies institutions use to expand their market share is line extension. When combined with digital branding technology, this

strategy becomes a strategic approach to enhance brand expansion and increase brand recognition. Educational institutions, including MAN 2 Tulungagung, implement line extension activities to measure the extent of their recognition within society. The goal is to establish a trend within society. MAN 2 Tulungagung has successfully implemented brand expansion through various digital technology platforms, such as its official website, WhatsApp Group, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. A key element in forecasting successful brand development is the consistency of the new attributes with the parent brand as perceived by consumers. The degree of compatibility is essential in developing line extensions, as quality transfer will be more effective when the two product classes are aligned.

Second, brand extensions. The brand extension integrates educational institutions in reaching a broader brand identity, serving as a generator that increases public awareness of the institution's high-quality brand image. Brand extension aims: Brand extension aims to introduce the institution to the public as a renewed brand identity to fulfill the expectation that the institution will be widely recognized. In other words, the brand name extension is supported by sufficient brand-related facilities. Moreover, MAN 2 Tulungagung, as a leading educational institution, is expected to expand its institutional brand identity through the support of digital branding technology. This, in turn, is anticipated to increase the number of clients utilizing its educational services.

Third, co-branding is another important concept that refers to the integration of two or more brands into a single product or initiative to increase an institution's electability and appeal to potential students. Combining brands through co-branding tends to attract consumer interest, as it creates an impression of uniqueness and added value.

Challenges and Impacts of Branding Digitalization

This suboptimal coordination risks delaying the dissemination of important information, which in turn may affect the effectiveness of branding. In addition, limited human resources present a significant challenge. Only one public relations staff member is responsible for managing various communication platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, the website, and WhatsApp Groups. The heavy workload often affects the quality of digital content, although the madrasah continues to make efforts to maintain consistency in the information delivered. Understanding these challenges is crucial for a comprehensive view of the digital branding process.

Another challenge is the limited observation time during the strategy evaluation process. Due to the short duration of observation and analysis of digital activities, some critical aspects may go unidentified or inadequately addressed. This highlights the importance of thorough strategic planning and staff training to enhance their competencies in managing information technology. Nevertheless, MAN 2 Tulungagung has taken proactive steps to address these challenges. Activities are planned well in advance to improve the efficiency of internal coordination. In addition, the madrasah has scheduled training for public relations staff to strengthen their capabilities in managing various digital platforms effectively.

The optimization of information technology-based branding implemented at MAN 2 Tulungagung has significantly impacted public participation and the institution's reputation. One key success is the increase in the number of new students drawn to the madrasah's flagship programs, such as performing arts and competitive sports. The institution's identity, which integrates academic and non-academic excellence, has been further strengthened. This identity has become an attraction for local students and those from other regions, demonstrating the proven effectiveness of branding in expanding the madrasah's sphere of influence.

The digital branding strategy implemented at MAN 2 Tulungagung has significantly enhanced the institution's reputation and public perception. Consistent and informative branding has fostered public trust in the quality of educational services. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have proven highly effective tools for building engagement and capturing

public attention. Regular posts featuring student achievements, extracurricular activities, and institutional agendas help reinforce the image of the madrasah as a progressive and high-quality educational institution.

Discussion

MAN 2 Tulungagung's innovative use of information technology, particularly social media, the official website, and WhatsApp Groups is a testament to its forward-thinking branding strategy. Instagram and TikTok, the primary platforms, are tools and creative avenues for attracting the younger generation's attention. The content, such as posts about student achievements, regular agendas, and extracurricular programs, is informative and engaging. This strategy, in line with Pienrasmi (2015), enables the madrasah to establish two-way relationships with its audiences, enhancing public engagement.

The official website of the madrasah, a beacon of transparency, plays a vital role in providing clear and comprehensive information regarding flagship programs and the student admission process. This transparency, as highlighted by Bertilsson et al. (2024), is not just a feature but a cornerstone of public trust, which is the foundation for successful branding. In addition, using WhatsApp Groups for direct communication further reinforces this trust, as noted by Raghupathi and Wu (2011), who emphasize that direct communication through digital technology enhances the efficiency of information delivery.

Brand extension equity has a significant impact on customers' decisions when choosing a product (Wang et al., 2024). Given the current conditions, there is a real need for new and high-quality brand extensions, as strategic brand extensions can lead to positive transformation (Barman et al., 2023). According to Arifin et al., (2020), introducing a truly new branded product requires greater marketing efforts in terms of time and cost to promote and expand brand recognition and build consumer awareness. From another perspective, a company can benefit from the emotional bond already established between the original brand and its extensions. Therefore, the investment required for brand extension may be lower than introducing an entirely new brand.

A co-branding strategy is also considered a practical approach to building or enhancing brand equity more broadly within society (Confetto et al., 2023). In addition to boosting the electability and attractiveness of a brand, co-branded products can be used to achieve broad and long-term market penetration. This strategy is exemplified by MAN 2 Tulungagung, which develops co-branding identity collaborations grounded in a strong commitment to Islamic values, as reflected in its curriculum and flagship program, thus providing a distinctive identity for prospective students considering enrollment at MAN 2 Tulungagung. The following is a picture of the strategy for optimizing digital branding to improve brand identity.

Despite successfully leveraging information technology, MAN 2 Tulungagung faces several challenges that must be addressed to enhance the effectiveness of its branding strategy. One of the main challenges is the limited human resources, with only one public relations staff member responsible for managing various digital platforms, such as social media, the official website, and WhatsApp Groups. The high workload often results in suboptimal quality of digital content. Arifuddin et al., (2024) note that limited staffing and technical competencies frequently hinder the effective implementation of information technology.

The official website of the madrasah functions as a formal communication channel, providing accurate and relevant information to the public. Transparency in information dissemination through the website further strengthens public trust in the institution (Soebiantoro et al., 2024). In addition, WhatsApp Groups facilitate the direct delivery of information to parents, thereby fostering stronger relationships between the madrasah and its community. The success of this branding strategy demonstrates that MAN 2 Tulungagung has established a clear differentiation from other educational institutions. The increased public participation and growing

positive reputation prove that optimizing information technology can effectively support the madrasah's branding success. This strategy enhances the institution's competitiveness and lays the foundation for consistently producing excellent and high-quality students.

The success of the technology-based branding strategy at SMAN 8 Malang is evident in its positive impact on the institution's reputation and public participation. One of the key indicators of this success is the increasing number of new students attracted to the madrasah's flagship programs, such as arts and sports. As reflected in its curriculum and activities, the institution's strong commitment to Islamic values significantly appeals to students from various regions, creating a distinct differentiation that sets MAN 2 Tulungagung apart from other madrasahs. In addition, flagship programs such as Culinary Arts, Ma'had Al-Furqon, and the award-winning SATELIT application (*Sistem Administrasi Terpadu Madrasah Aliyah 2 Tulungagung*), which earned first place in an innovation competition, further strengthen the institution's identity. MAN 2 Tulungagung's vision is to realize a learning environment that is Intelligent, Dedicated, Innovative, Competitive, and Islamic. The academic and non-academic achievements of MAN 2 Tulungagung's students at the national level are actively showcased through social media, reinforcing its brand identity and enhancing public trust.

Social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, has proven effective in capturing public attention (Saragih & Tarigan, 2020). Consistent and relevant content fosters positive interactions between the madrasah and its audience, enhancing public loyalty. In addition, the official madrasah website serves as a formal source of information that supports the public in making informed decisions to entrust the institution as an educational choice. Research by Kumar et al. (2024) affirms that branding through information technology creates a better user experience, enhances transparency, and strengthens the relationship between educational institutions and the community. This success demonstrates that consistent and strategic branding not only increases public participation but also establishes a foundation for the sustained reputation of the madrasah. As stated by Confetto et al. (2023), Surahman and Fitria (2023), and Wahyunto et al. (2024), effective branding has a long-term impact on building a positive image and enhancing the competitiveness of educational institutions in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how digital branding strategies are optimized at MAN 2 Tulungagung. The findings show that various digital platforms—Instagram, TikTok, the official website, and WhatsApp Groups—have effectively enhanced the madrasah's brand identity and increased public engagement. These platforms build awareness, facilitate communication, and highlight the institution's flagship programs in arts and sports, which are rooted in Islamic values. The main findings reveal that digital branding has contributed to an increase in new student enrollment, especially in flagship programs, each platform plays a distinct role in branding communication, and challenges remain, particularly in human resources and internal coordination. This study adds to the literature on digital branding within faith-based educational institutions. Theoretically, it adds to the literature on digital branding within faith-based educational institutions. Practically, it provides a model for other madrasahs to implement digital branding strategies to strengthen institutional identity. This study implies that madrasahs can enhance public interest and visibility by leveraging digital technologies. Strategic planning and staff training in digital communication are essential to ensure sustainable and impactful branding initiatives. However, the research is limited by its focus on a single institution and resource constraints, especially the reliance on one PR staff member. These factors may limit the transferability of the findings. Future research should be collaborative, involving multiple madrasahs with varying profiles to gain broader insights. This shared learning and collaboration could lead to developing and testing a comprehensive digital branding model tailored for Islamic educational institutions, fostering a sense of community and shared progress in the field.

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