Quality and Identity in Islamic Education Branding: Exploring Quality, Culture, and Sustainability

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Abstract:

Branding in Islamic secondary education is crucial for institutional legitimacy, yet existing studies often focus on marketing tactics or isolated quality indicators, overlooking the deeper mechanisms that build a credible brand. This research addresses this gap by investigating how quality management drives authentic branding in two Indonesian Islamic schools with contrasting governance models: a state-run madrasah (MAN 1 Bojonegoro) and a private pesantren-based school (MAS Abu Dzarrin). Employing a qualitative multi-case design, data were collected through 24 semi-structured interviews, 120 hours of participant observation, and document analysis. Thematic analysis, assisted by NVivo, revealed a dynamic four-stage process: participatory strategic planning sets the direction; a deeply rooted quality culture embeds plans into daily routines; stakeholder satisfaction and trust amplify reputation through advocacy; and sustainability management protects achievements during periods of Leadership and market change. The study concludes that enduring branding is not a marketing veneer, but rather the organic outcome of consistently excellent practices that are embraced by the entire school community. It offers a replicable framework for faith-based institutions to achieve long-term legitimacy and trust.

Keywords: *Islamic education; institutional branding; quality culture; stakeholder satisfaction; sustainability management; strategic planning*

Abstrak:

Branding di pendidikan menengah Islam sangat penting untuk legitimasi kelembagaan, namun studi yang ada seringkali berfokus pada taktik pemasaran atau indikator mutu yang terisolasi, mengabaikan mekanisme yang lebih dalam yang membangun merek yang kredibel. Penelitian ini mengatasi kesenjangan tersebut dengan menyelidiki bagaimana manajemen mutu mendorong branding yang otentik di dua sekolah Islam Indonesia dengan model tata kelola yang kontras: madrasah negeri (MAN 1 Bojonegoro) dan sekolah swasta berbasis pesantren (MAS Abu Dzarrin). Dengan menggunakan desain multi-kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui 24 wawancara semi-terstruktur, 120 jam observasi partisipan, dan analisis dokumen. Analisis tematik, yang dibantu oleh NVivo, mengungkap proses dinamis empat tahap: perencanaan strategis partisipatif menetapkan arah; budaya mutu yang tertanam kuat mengintegrasikan rencana ke dalam rutinitas sehari-hari; kepuasan dan kepercayaan pemangku kepentingan memperkuat reputasi melalui advokasi; dan manajemen keberlanjutan melindungi capaian selama terjadi perubahan kepemimpinan dan pasar. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa branding yang berkelanjutan bukanlah lapisan pemasaran, melainkan hasil organik dari praktik-praktik unggul yang konsisten dan dijiwai oleh seluruh komunitas sekolah. Penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka kerja yang dapat

direplikasi bagi lembaga berbasis agama untuk mencapai legitimasi dan kepercayaan jangka panjang.

Introduction

Globally, educational institutions are expected to provide not only robust academic results but also a distinct public image. Parents, policymakers, and donors are progressively assessing institutions based on quantifiable quality and the robustness of their reputation (Harvey & Green, 1993). The simultaneous demand has generated increased interest in institutional branding, which involves the strategic development of an organization's image and credibility through quality practices and focused communication (Anholt, 2016; Rachman et al., 2025). In Indonesia, Islamic educational institutions view branding as an essential requirement rather than a mere marketing strategy, as perceptions of quality significantly influence enrollment and community backing in a competitive educational landscape (Azra, 2019; Munawwaroh & Rahayu, 2024).

The madrasah aliyah of Indonesia exemplifies this difficulty distinctly. Over the past decade, governmental reforms and growing public demand for high-quality education have prompted many institutions to achieve or exceed national standards (Widayat et al., 2025). However, popular perceptions remain inconsistent. Numerous families continue to associate Islamic schools with a robust religious ethos, while questioning their academic rigor in comparison to conventional senior high schools (Rosser, 2023). In areas like Bojonegoro, where economic advancement and demographic variety intensify rivalry among secondary schools, madrasah administrators acknowledge that maintaining—and promoting—educational quality is crucial for institutional viability.

Quality management provides a methodical framework for fulfilling these requirements. Total Quality Management (TQM) and its associated frameworks prioritize ongoing enhancement, stakeholder satisfaction, and an ingrained "quality culture" that connects internal processes with external reputation (Bush, 2020; Dues, 2023). In educational settings, these concepts necessitate strategic planning, meticulous evaluation of service outcomes, and a sustained dedication to stakeholder involvement (Imran et al., 2025). In Islamic education, the implementation of such methodologies must respect the unique governance frameworks and communal customs of the madrasah; yet, data increasingly suggests that effective management enhances both academic achievement and community trust.

Despite the rapid growth of Islamic educational institutions and the expanding literature on quality assurance in Indonesia, the relationship between quality management and institutional branding remains largely unexamined. Current research typically analyzes either internal quality systems (such as curriculum and

teacher professionalism) or external promotional methods independently (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). Limited research has examined the interplay between everyday management practices, stakeholder satisfaction, and long-term sustainability in shaping a public image of excellence. International research predominantly emphasizes Western or private-sector contexts, providing scant understanding of how Islamic schools in a majority-Muslim country convert excellent culture into a discernible brand (Hill et al., 2003). This gap hinders comprehension of how quality-oriented branding can be achieved when educational institutions operate within distinct cultural and regulatory contexts. Bojonegoro, an economically dynamic regency in East Java, presents an opportune context for investigating this issue. Madrasah aliyah directly competes with public and private general senior high schools for students and resources. Two institutions are distinguished by their reputed success: MAN 1 Bojonegoro, a state-operated madrasah, and MAS Abu Dzarrin, a privately administered school with profound pesantren heritage. Both have established robust community trust and evident quality credentials, although disparities in governance, resources, and local expectations. Their experiences provide a comparative analysis of how quality management approaches support effective branding in Islamic education.

This research employs a qualitative, multi-case design to elucidate these dynamics. Data were gathered through prolonged field observations, semi-structured interviews with educational leaders, educators, parents, and students, as well as the examination of internal documents, including strategic plans and quality reports (Miles et al., 2014). Cross-case study uncovers similarities and distinctions that clarify how these schools construct and maintain their public image. The results underscore four interconnected factors that propel effective branding: strategic planning, quality culture, stakeholder satisfaction, and sustainability management. Strategic planning guarantees that objectives for curriculum, staffing, and facilities are explicitly linked to quantifiable outcomes and conveyed to stakeholders. A comprehensive quality culture, bolstered by Leadership and routine practice, harmonizes teacher performance, student services, and community involvement. A consistent focus on stakeholder satisfaction—encompassing parents, students, and local education authorities—yields ongoing input and fosters loyalty. Sustainability management ensures the acquisition of resources and institutional knowledge essential for the sustained enhancement of practices across time. Collectively, these elements establish a reputable brand that appeals to both local communities and potential students.

This research offers three significant discoveries by examining the underexplored relationship between quality management and branding in Islamic education. It illustrates that branding can result from stringent internal management rather than solely from external marketing efforts. Secondly, it illustrates how a quality culture, integrated into daily operations rather than segregated marketing initiatives, establishes enduring reputational capital. Third, it provides a comparative examination of public and private madrasahs, demonstrating how governance forms influence, although do not dictate, the development of a robust institutional image. The subsequent sections of this article are organized as follows. The subsequent section examines literature on educational branding, quality management, and Islamic education, highlighting conceptual linkages and the constraints of current research. The methodology section delineates the multi-case design and data analysis. The

following sections delineate and analyze the findings, highlighting cross-case themes and their ramifications for policy and practice. The study concludes with recommendations for Islamic school administrators and policymakers seeking to integrate quality management with sustainable reputation enhancement.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative multi-case design to explore how Islamic senior high schools in Bojonegoro implement quality management as the foundation of institutional branding. A multi-case strategy allows careful comparison across settings and supports theory building in contexts where prior research is limited. Two institutions were chosen through purposive sampling—MAN 1 Bojonegoro, a state-managed madrasah aliyah, and MAS Abu Dzarrin, a privately governed pesantren-based school—because both have established reputations for educational quality and community trust. Selecting sites with contrasting governance structures enabled the identification of both shared mechanisms and context-specific adaptations (Miles et al., 2014).

Fieldwork was conducted from March to September 2024 using triangulated techniques. Data collection involved a combination of in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to capture the complexity of daily practice. Twenty-four informants, including principals, vice-principals, teachers, students, parents, and local education officials, were interviewed for 45 to 90 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with the participants' consent (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Observations, totaling about 120 hours across the two schools, focused on staff meetings, classroom interactions, and community events to illuminate how quality procedures and branding messages were enacted in everyday settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Institutional documents such as strategic plans, quality assurance reports, and promotional materials were also examined to supplement and cross-check the interview and observation data (Kaplan-Weinger & Marks, 2024).

The analytic process followed a thematic approach. Transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly and coded inductively to identify recurring concepts related to strategic planning, quality culture, stakeholder satisfaction, and sustainability. Axial coding was then applied to link these categories to the overarching theme of quality-driven branding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). NVivo 14 software facilitated systematic coding and retrieval of data segments (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Cross-case synthesis highlighted convergences and divergences between the two institutions, enabling the development of conceptual propositions (Miles et al., 2014).

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Member checks were conducted with key informants to confirm the accuracy of emerging interpretations. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents reduced single-source bias, while peer debriefing with two external qualitative researchers strengthened analytical rigor (Cresswell, 2013). An audit trail documented every analytic decision to support dependability and confirmability. Ethical approval was obtained from the host university's research committee, and all participants provided informed consent consistent with established educational research guidelines (Bera, 2018).

By combining multi-case comparison with rigorous qualitative procedures, this methodological design captures the complex relationship between quality

management and institutional branding in Islamic schooling and generates insights that can inform similar educational contexts.

Results and Discussion
Result
Strategic Quality Planning and the Formation of a School-Wide Quality Culture

The results from MAN 1 Bojonegoro and MAS Abu Dzarrin indicate that strategic quality planning is not simply a managerial task but a catalyst for fostering a comprehensive culture of quality inside the school. Both universities initiate comprehensive strategic plans that provide quantifiable targets for education, infrastructure, and community involvement. This reflects the assertion of Sallis (2002) and Deming that quality management in education necessitates precise long-term planning matched with the institutional goal (Sallis, 2014). At MAN 1, the five-year development plan amalgamates national madrasah standards with locally established indicators, whereas MAS Abu Dzarrin enhances Ministry of Religious Affairs benchmarks with pesantren-oriented character education objectives. The integration of national and local agendas exemplifies how strategic planning can honor contextual diversity while prioritizing continuous improvement (Bush, 2020).

Figure 1.
The Framework of Quality Culture and Institutional Branding

Note. This figure illustrates how Strategic Planning acts as the catalyst, Leadership as the driver, and Stakeholder Engagement as the glue that forms a sustainable Quality Culture, ultimately resulting in Institutional Branding.

A key discovery is that planning alone fails to yield sustained excellence until it is integrated into daily practices. In both institutions, the strategic plan serves as a "living document," directing curriculum development, personnel evaluation, and financial distribution. This corroborates the perspective of Bryson and Mintzberg that good strategic planning should be both iterative and participatory. Educators and administrative personnel participate in target-setting meetings, thereby enhancing

ownership and commitment (Nomin et al., 2025). Research in other educational settings similarly indicates that extensive participation promotes collective accountability and improves implementation fidelity (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). The Bojonegoro cases demonstrate that when stakeholders regard the plan as their own, they assimilate quality objectives and integrate them into classroom practice.

The establishment of a comprehensive quality culture within the school is a direct result of this collaborative planning. A quality culture is described as the shared attitudes, expectations, and behaviors that emphasize continual improvement (Westerheijden et al., 2007). Observations at both institutions revealed standard practices—such as weekly reflective meetings, peer course observations, and student feedback forums—that effectively exemplify the ideals of Total Quality Management (TQM) far beyond mere compliance checklists. Educators characterize these activities as integral to their professional identity rather than mere external obligations, reinforcing Seyfried et al.'s assertion that cultural integration surpasses formal policies in influence (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

Leadership is pivotal in converting plans into culture. The leaders at MAN 1 and MAS Abu Dzarrin exemplify quality-focused behaviors by fostering open communication, employing data-driven decision-making, and consistently monitoring established objectives. This scattered yet decisive Leadership aligns with the transformational and instructional leadership models established by Leithwood and Jantzi, as well as Hallinger, which are essential for enduring school enhancement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; R & Kamil, 2025). By associating strategic aims with moral purpose, leaders motivate teachers to perceive quality as essential to their religious and professional responsibilities, which aligns with the findings of Harris and Jones regarding the moral aspect of school leadership (Supriatna, 2025).

Stakeholder engagement further strengthens the culture of quality. Parents participate in regular evaluation sessions and provide feedback on service quality, while graduated networks facilitate program innovation and resource mobilization. This corroborates prior evidence that external stakeholders enhance internal accountability and establish a feedback loop vital for continuous (Kodir & Rotim, 2024). In Bojonegoro, involvement extends beyond formal events; informal conversations following prayer groups or community festivities offer supplementary opportunities for dialogue and trust development.

A comparative analysis reveals that although MAN 1, as a governmental institution, has more consistent funding and regulatory control, MAS Abu Dzarrin capitalizes on the intimate ties within its pesantren setting to maintain motivation and peer accountability. Both approaches converge on a common quality ethos, emphasizing that culture can thrive under many governance structures if strategic planning is inclusive and mission-oriented (Ehren et al., 2013). This corresponds with studies across several contexts—from Finnish comprehensive schools to Malaysian Islamic schools—emphasizing that disparities in governance are less significant than the commitment of Leadership and the engagement of stakeholders (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Kodir & Rotim, 2024).

The Bojonegoro instances demonstrate that a strong quality culture directly enhances institutional branding, even prior to any explicit advertising efforts. Parents participating in the study often referenced "discipline," "consistency," and "continuous improvement" as factors influencing their decision to select these

institutions. This conclusion aligns with the assertion that genuine branding emerges when internal practices and external perceptions align (Girardin et al. 2024). Strategic planning and a culture of quality establish a reputation for excellence that marketing alone cannot create.

These outcomes possess broader significance. Initially, they demonstrate that Islamic schools can employ advanced quality management strategies while preserving their unique identity, a finding corroborated by comparative analyses of faith-based education (Yusuf & Mai, 2024). Secondly, they propose that strategic planning procedures should be viewed less as technical tasks and more as community-building activities that foster commitment and a shared purpose (Harris & Jones, 2021). Ultimately, they demonstrate that instilling a culture of quality necessitates continuous leadership focus on professional development, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing reflection.

The experiences of MAN 1 Bojonegoro and MAS Abu Dzarrin demonstrate that well-designed strategic plans, when inclusive and regularly reviewed, can evolve from mere administrative documents into the foundation of a comprehensive quality culture inside a school. This culture then emerges as the most compelling manifestation of institutional branding, conveying reliability and excellence to the broader community. This study elucidates the interplay between planning and culture, contributing to global discussions on how educational organizations, especially those with religious affiliations, can attain sustainable excellence and a reputable public image.

Strategic Quality Planning and the Formation of a School-Wide Quality Culture

Findings from MAN 1 Bojonegoro and MAS Abu Dzarrin show that strategic quality planning drives the creation of a strong school-wide quality culture rather than serving as a routine managerial task. Both institutions set measurable goals for academics, facilities, and community engagement, reflecting Sallis and Deming's call for long-term planning aligned with institutional vision. MAN 1 merges national madrasah standards with local targets, while MAS Abu Dzarrin combines Ministry criteria with pesantren-based character education, illustrating how strategic planning can respect local context while sustaining continuous improvement (Bush, 2020; Dues, 2023). Planning achieves a lasting impact only when it is woven into daily practice. At both schools, the strategic plan serves as a "living document," guiding curriculum development, staff evaluation, and budgeting. Consistent with Bryson and Mintzberg, this iterative, participatory process—where teachers and staff help set targets—builds ownership, collective accountability, and stronger implementation. (Bryan Givan et al., 2025; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The Bojonegoro cases demonstrate that when stakeholders regard the plan as their own, they assimilate quality objectives and incorporate them into classroom practices.

The establishment of a comprehensive quality culture within the school is a direct result of this collaborative planning. A quality culture is typically characterized by the shared beliefs, expectations, and behaviors that emphasize ongoing enhancement (Harvey & Green, 1993). Observations at both institutions revealed systematic practices—such as weekly reflective meetings, peer lesson observations, and student feedback forums—that effectively exemplify the ideals of Total Quality Management (TQM) far beyond mere compliance checklists. Educators characterize these activities as integral to their professional identity rather than mere external

obligations, reinforcing Hämäläinen et al.'s assertion that cultural integration surpasses formal policies in influence.

Leadership is pivotal in converting plans into culture. The leaders at MAN 1 and MAS Abu Dzarrin exemplify quality-oriented habits by fostering open communication, employing data-driven decision-making, and consistently monitoring agreed-upon objectives. This scattered yet decisive Leadership aligns with the transformational and instructional leadership models established by Leithwood and Jantzi, as well as Hallinger, which are essential for enduring school enhancement (Sliwka et al., 2023). By associating strategic aims with moral purpose, leaders motivate teachers to perceive quality as essential to their religious and professional responsibilities, consistent with the findings of Harris and Jones about the moral aspect of school leadership.

Stakeholder engagement further strengthens the culture of quality. Parents participate in regular evaluation sessions and provide feedback on service quality, while graduated networks contribute to program innovation and resource mobilization. This corroborates previous findings that external stakeholders enhance internal accountability and establish a feedback loop vital for continuous improvement (Epstein et al., 2015). In Bojonegoro, involvement extends beyond formal events; informal conversations following prayer groups or community festivities offer supplementary opportunities for dialogue and trust development.

A comparative analysis indicates that although MAN 1, as a state institution, enjoys more steady funding and governmental scrutiny, MAS Abu Dzarrin capitalizes on the intimate ties within its *pesantren* setting to maintain motivation and peer monitoring. Both approaches converge on a common quality ethos, emphasizing that culture can thrive under many governance structures if strategic planning is inclusive and mission-oriented (Ehren et al., 2013). This corresponds with studies across several contexts—from Finnish comprehensive schools to Malaysian Islamic schools—emphasizing that disparities in governance are less significant than the dedication of Leadership and the support of stakeholders (Sujari et al., 2024).

The Bojonegoro instances demonstrate that a strong quality culture directly enhances institutional branding, even prior to any explicit advertising efforts. Parents participating in the survey often cited "discipline," "consistency," and "continuous improvement" as factors influencing their decision to select these institutions. This discovery aligns with the assertions of Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, as well as Jeong and Choi, who contend that authentic branding emerges when internal practices and external views align (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). Strategic planning and a culture of quality establish a reputation for excellence that marketing alone cannot create.

Figure 2.
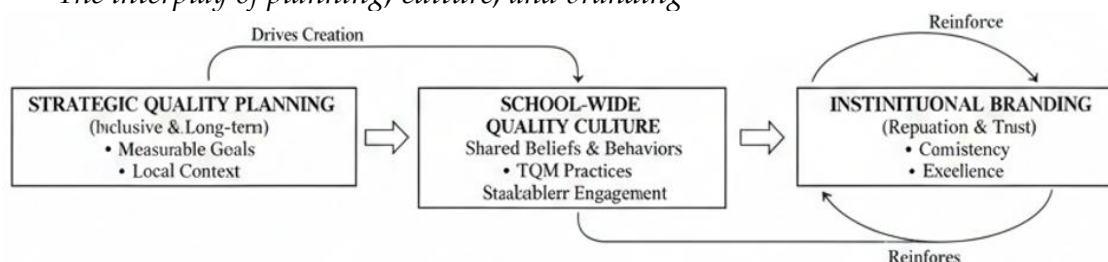*The interplay of planning, culture, and branding*

Table 1
Summary of Key Findings and Interpretive Discussion

Themaic Focus	Evidence from MAN 1 Bojengboro	Evidence from MAS Abu Dzarrin Intensin
1. Five-yar development plan aligned with nationaʎ amiice, & parent madimsh stantards	2. Parte–yar develiing planning meetings with nadimasl standards	1. Five-yar developrrz plan aligned with national madinasl standards
• Formation of a Quality cstisfaction	2. Particiiiptlay planning metiing dool neetters	
3. Quality indicators ennæapas academíis, character development & student support	3. Particiopalny lnectings with teachers, schons, school comdenve, aprailsf ocliupment & sudent support	• Quality indicator enpvan mpergtkisⁱ iixd sxtua ẻt iiglne iis conclopmert, at siend ed oŋals iiis sel aıl student support
• Instituiunal Branding	• Susteimbiter enejegrtorne iis Leal Context	• Queeabbiar sl anad kosellemers

Figure 3.
Documentary evidence and interview snippets

These findings have wider ramifications. Initially, they demonstrate that Islamic schools can employ advanced quality management strategies while preserving their unique identity, a finding corroborated by comparative analyses of faith-based education. Secondly, they propose that strategic planning procedures should be perceived not merely as technical tasks, but as community-building activities that foster commitment and a shared purpose (Bramston et al., 2011; Choi et al., 2019). Ultimately, they demonstrate that instilling a culture of quality necessitates continuous leadership focus on professional development, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing reflection (Sliwka et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the experiences of MAN 1 Bojonegoro and MAS Abu Dzarrin demonstrate that meticulously developed strategic plans, when inclusive and regularly reviewed, can evolve from mere administrative papers into the foundation of a comprehensive school quality culture. This culture then emerges as the most compelling manifestation of institutional branding, conveying reliability and excellence to the broader community. This study elucidates the interplay between planning and culture, contributing to global discussions on how educational organizations, especially those with religious affiliations, can attain sustainable excellence and a reputable public image.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that strategic quality planning functions as the

foundational mechanism for cultivating a school-wide quality culture in Islamic secondary education. Across both MAN 1 Bojonegoro and MAS Abu Dzarrin, quality planning was not treated as a bureaucratic requirement but as a shared institutional compass that aligned academic standards, religious identity, and community expectations (Leithwood et al., 2020). Evidence from interviews and observations suggests that strategic plans were effectively translated into measurable targets, routine evaluations, and professional development practices, which in turn shaped the everyday behavior of teachers and administrators (Alexander, 2022). This process was reinforced by participatory planning structures, in which stakeholders collectively defined quality indicators, thereby fostering ownership and consistency in implementation (Meyer et al., 2023). Notably, the results indicate that a quality culture emerged not through isolated initiatives, but through sustained alignment between planning, leadership practices, and daily routines (Pedro et al., 2020). As a result, quality became an internalized norm rather than an externally imposed standard. In conclusion, the data confirm that strategic quality planning serves as the structural backbone through which a coherent and enduring quality culture is formed, enabling Islamic schools to maintain credibility and institutional legitimacy.

The emergence of a strong quality culture can be explained by several interrelated causal factors embedded within the planning process itself (Jasti et al., 2022). First, participatory strategic planning reduced resistance to change by positioning teachers and staff as co-owners of institutional goals rather than passive implementers (Hallinger, 2020). This inclusivity fostered psychological commitment and professional accountability, which previous studies have identified as prerequisites for sustainable school improvement (Prenger et al., 2021). Second, the integration of national standards with pesantren-based values enabled contextual relevance, ensuring that quality initiatives resonated with both professional and religious identities (Amin, 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that teachers perceive quality improvement as part of their moral duty, rather than merely an administrative obligation, thereby strengthening their intrinsic motivation (Azorín et al., 2020). Third, leadership consistency played a critical role in sustaining momentum, as leaders continuously reinforced quality objectives through modeling, feedback, and reflective forums (Nadeem, 2024). In conclusion, the quality culture observed in both institutions was caused by the convergence of participatory planning, value alignment, and leadership coherence, rather than by formal policy enforcement alone.

The internalization of strategic quality planning generated several consequential outcomes that extended beyond organizational efficiency (Zaghmout & Harrison, 2025). One significant impact was the normalization of continuous improvement as part of professional identity, leading teachers to engage in reflective practice, peer observation, and data-informed instruction without external pressure (Bendermacher et al., 2021). Additionally, the quality culture strengthened stakeholder trust, as parents and communities experienced consistency between institutional promises and daily practices, reinforcing perceptions of reliability and credibility (Winkielman & Nowak, 2022). Empirical accounts indicate that this trust translated into positive word-of-mouth advocacy, effectively functioning as organic institutional branding (Kurniawan et al., 2024). Furthermore, the schools demonstrated greater resilience during leadership transitions, as quality norms were embedded collectively rather than dependent on individual authority (Printy & Liu, 2021). These outcomes

suggest that strategic planning, when culturally embedded, produces durable institutional capacity rather than short-term performance gains. In conclusion, the interpreted effects of quality-oriented planning include enhanced professional agency, strengthened public trust, and long-term organizational sustainability.

When compared with prior research, these findings both align with and extend existing scholarship on educational quality and branding (Rajkumar et al., 2022). Earlier studies often emphasize marketing strategies or external communication as primary drivers of institutional reputation (Hamdani et al., 2022). In contrast, the present findings highlight internal quality culture as the principal source of credible branding, supporting recent arguments that authenticity in education branding emerges from lived practice rather than promotional tactics (Dobrev & Verhaal, 2024). Unlike studies that focus predominantly on either public or private institutions, this research demonstrates that governance type does not determine quality outcomes when participatory planning and leadership commitment are present (Nash et al., 2024). Moreover, while Western-based studies often frame quality culture in secular terms, this study reveals how Islamic moral frameworks can strengthen, rather than constrain, modern quality management practices (Taj et al., 2024). In conclusion, the findings diverge from marketing-centered models and contribute a culturally grounded perspective that positions quality culture as the primary differentiator in Islamic education branding.

Based on these findings, several actionable recommendations can be proposed at conceptual, methodological, and policy levels. Conceptually, future frameworks of educational branding should reposition quality culture as the core construct, treating branding as an emergent outcome rather than a strategic endpoint (Edy et al., 2024). Methodologically, schools should institutionalize participatory strategic planning cycles that integrate stakeholder feedback, reflective practice, and contextual values to ensure sustained ownership and adaptability (Kasemsarn et al., 2025). At the policy level, educational authorities should move beyond compliance-based quality assurance and incentivize culture-building practices through leadership development and professional learning communities (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023). Empirical evidence from both schools suggests that such policies enhance resilience, trust, and legitimacy, particularly in faith-based institutions facing competitive pressures (Dube & LenkaBula, 2020). In conclusion, aligning strategic planning with cultural formation offers a viable solution for achieving sustainable quality and authentic institutional branding in Islamic education systems.

Conclusion

This study of MAN 1 Bojonegoro and MAS Abu Dzarrin shows that a respected institutional brand in Islamic secondary education is built from the inside out. Reputation is not the product of slogans or glossy brochures; it is the visible tip of a deep structure of quality that the entire community experiences and affirms. Four interwoven strands create that structure. First, participatory strategic quality planning—consistent with Bryson's strategy theory and Deming's Total Quality Management—aligns resources and daily decisions with long-term goals. Second, a culture of quality, as described by Harvey and Green's concept of quality as transformation and Schein's model of organizational culture, turns plans into lived habits. Third, stakeholder trust and satisfaction generate powerful advocacy when lived experiences align with institutional ideals, echoing Bryk and Schneider's

relational-trust framework and Kotler and Fox's insights on education marketing. Fourth, diversified funding, leadership succession, and socially responsible initiatives secure achievements amid political or economic shifts, reflecting Fullan's and Hargreaves & Fink's principles of sustainable leadership. Together, these strands reveal that enduring branding is not a marketing tactic but the natural expression of a community's sustained excellence.

The research contributes a replicable framework for faith-based institutions seeking long-term legitimacy: integrate inclusive planning, nurture a pervasive quality culture, engage stakeholders as brand advocates, and embed sustainability safeguards. By demonstrating how internal excellence naturally evolves into an authentic public image, the study extends branding theory to Islamic schooling and shows that differing governance—state versus *pesantren*—does not predetermine reputational strength. This qualitative, multi-case study focuses on two schools within a single Indonesian regency, thereby limiting its generalizability. Broader comparative studies across regions, larger samples, or mixed-method designs could test and refine the framework. Future research may also investigate how digital communication, shifts in national policy, or international partnerships influence the durability of Islamic education branding.

Acknowledgments

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