

School Branding Strategy in the Digital Era to Increase Engagement Through Digital Marketing

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Abstract

The increasingly fierce competition among educational institutions requires schools to implement effective branding strategies to attract public interest. This study aims to analyze the digital branding strategy of SDI Tarbiyatul Ummah in increasing engagement through digital marketing, as well as to explore collaboration opportunities with its parent foundation, Yayasan Al-Manshur Tarbiyatul Ummah. This qualitative research collected data through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving the principal, social media team, and parents. The researcher also served as participatory observer as the foundation's social media manager. The results indicate that the branding strategy relies on daily activity documentation distributed organically through an electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) mechanism by parents. The QUALITAS tagline (Qur'ani, Peduli, Berprestasi) has successfully formed a positive impression among parents, and social media plays two simultaneous roles: as a discovery medium for prospective parents actively seeking information, and as a confirmation medium for those who learned about the school through other channels. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is hindered by reactive content planning due to limited human resources (single-handler) in both the school and the foundation. A content gap was also identified between what the school produces and the actual informational needs of parents. Furthermore, collaboration between the school and the foundation remains one-way due to the lack of a coordination system at the technical operational level. This study recommends the development of a collaborative content calendar, content diversification responsive to parents' needs, optimization of TikTok as a discovery platform, and formalization of the foundation's role as an active strategic partner within the private school digital branding ecosystem.

INTRODUCTION

Education is organized to prepare the mental, behavioral, and character traits needed by individuals to fulfill various roles and professions in the present and the future (Yuan, 2024; Educational Management Study Program et al., 2023). Education in Indonesia involves the active role of both government and non-government institutions in establishing educational facilities. The growth of educational institutions in Indonesia has led to increased competition among them (Sholeh, n.d.; Azizah, n.d.). In the context of schools, the products offered are in the form of educational services that encompass the institution's reputation, future opportunities, and a diverse selection of available programs (Indriyani, n.d.; Astuti et al., n.d.). To be able to compete, many schools build a brand so that the public is willing to enroll their children in those schools (Wahyunto et al., 2024; Oktaviani & Sutarsih, 2024).

A brand is a combination of physical and non-physical elements deliberately developed to foster awareness, shape identity, and strengthen the reputation of a product, service, person, location, or institution (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). Branding strategies are important to implement considering the high competition among educational institutions in attracting public interest (Oktaviani & Sutarsih, 2024; Hutami, 2020). School branding is an activity that cannot be done

abruptly; good strategic planning is needed to build a brand into a school identity (Oktaviani & Sutarsih, 2024; Riyanto & Kharisma, 2024).

One part of building a school brand is conducting marketing to establish brand communication with the public (Ariskawanti, n.d.; Budiarti et al., 2023). The goal of brand communication is to introduce the brand to a wide audience so as to increase awareness levels and strengthen their memory of the brand (Ramadhani & Widodo, n.d.; Pranata & Junaidi, 2023). Currently, marketing strategies in educational institutions focus on digital technology, known as digital marketing (Munawwaroh & Rahayu, 2024; Aimah et al., 2024). Digital marketing utilizes digital technology to build communication channels with potential customers more efficiently and effectively (Wahyunto et al., 2024; Sutrisno et al., 2023). Social media has become an inseparable part of customers' lives, so institutions need to provide a strategic focus on implementing these digital marketing models (Kim, 2021; France et al., 2025).

Kotler and Armstrong define marketing as a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others (Alfiyanto, 2020; Sya'adah, 2024). Kotler outlines three aspects of marketing strategy: (1) target market strategy based on demographic, psychographic, and behavioral segmentation; (2) competitive positioning strategy based on the institution's relative distinctiveness; and (3) a marketing mix strategy that identifies the 4P elements (Product, Place, Price, Promotion) and 3Ps for the service sector (Person, Process, Proof).

A number of studies have discussed school branding strategies through digital marketing. Ariskawanti showed that SDIT Al-Madinah Kebumen successfully increased engagement through a systematic digital marketing strategy that included human resource (HR) improvement, content design management, and routine evaluation by the school principal and the foundation (Ariskawanti, n.d.). Budiarti et al. emphasized the importance of a strong tagline, the school's unique flagship programs, and the frequency of uploads on digital media (Budiarti et al., 2023). Azizah emphasized a branding strategy that starts with audience research and then develops publications focused on the madrasah's advantages (Azizah, n.d.). Susilawati emphasized the importance of SWOT analysis as the basis for a school branding strategy (Susilawati & Harun, 2017).

In previous studies, the branding strategies used focused on developing the school's internal quality and the utilization of digital media. However, in many cases, private schools have foundations (yayasan) that oversee them, and this represents a collaborative opportunity that has not been widely explored in the literature. Although several studies have discussed the foundation as an evaluator, the foundation's role as an active partner in branding has not been widely examined. Therefore, this study discusses the branding strategy in the digital era by SDI Tarbiyatul Ummah by establishing collaboration with the foundation as its patron to be able to collaboratively plan and execute school branding activities.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method. Qualitative research is a type of research conducted in a natural setting, where the researcher acts as the main instrument. This research stems from field data, utilizing existing theories as a reference to explain the findings, and ultimately generates new theories. The main objective of qualitative research is to understand the views or perspectives of the parties involved (Budiarti et al., 2023; Fadli, 2021). This approach was chosen because it is able to contextually explore the experiences, views, and actual practices of the actors involved.

The subjects in this study are the parties directly involved in the school's branding and marketing process, namely the principal and the social media team of SDI Tarbiyatul Ummah. In addition, this study also involves the students' parents (guardians) as external informants. The involvement of parents is based on the consideration that determining an effective branding strategy cannot rely solely on the perspective of the actors; it also requires the perspective of the target audience so that the resulting recommendations can be more precisely targeted. Interviews were conducted with two parents who were purposively selected based on the different channels through which they first learned about the school. Furthermore, the researcher also acts as the social media manager for the Al-Manshur Tarbiyatul Ummah Foundation, which enables participatory observation of the foundation's social media management conditions. Data from these observations were recorded in the form of reflective notes and used as triangulation data.

Data collection was carried out through: (1) in-depth interviews with the principal, the school's social media team, and the parents; (2) direct observation of the digital marketing activities of the school and the foundation; (3) documentation study in the form of the school profile, social media posts, and Instagram Insights data from the @sditarbiyatulummah account.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman technique, which includes: (1) data reduction by sorting and simplifying the data; (2) data display in narrative form; (3) drawing conclusions by formulating interpretations from the discovered patterns. To ensure data validity, the researcher utilized source and technique triangulation by comparing data from the interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was also conducted with the informants to confirm the accuracy of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Target Audience and Brand Profile

SDI Tarbiyatul Ummah is an Islamic elementary school established in 2018 under the Al-Manshur Tarbiyatul Ummah Foundation, comprising 229 students from grades 1 to 6. The school utilizes the tagline "The School of the QUALITAS Generation," representing the values of Qur'ani (Quranic), Peduli (Caring), and Berprestasi (Achieving). Based on principal interviews, the primary target audience is Muslim families seeking Islamic character-based and achievement-oriented education. Geographically, applicants extend beyond the local Buduran District. Psychographically, the target comprises parents who actively use social media and prioritize character development. The school positions itself on the simultaneous formation of Quranic character, caring, and achievement.

Digital Branding Implementation and Customer Journeys

The school utilizes multiple platforms: Instagram (planned content), WhatsApp (class groups for teacher reports and personal statuses for wider reach), TikTok (additional platform with broader algorithmic reach), and YouTube (limited use). Content is consistently uploaded during prime times: 08:00–09:00, 12:00–13:00, and 18:00–20:30. The workflow involves teachers acting as field content producers by sending at least two documentation media per week to the WhatsApp groups, which the admin then curates and reposts. The principal notes that parents often voluntarily repost this content to their personal accounts.

Interview data revealed two distinct customer journeys. The first informant discovered the school by physically passing the building and only checked social media during registration. The second informant received a relative's recommendation and proactively researched the

school on Instagram and YouTube before enrolling.

Content Gaps and Value Imbalance

While parents can accurately recall the QUALITAS values, the visual representation on social media is disproportionate. The Qur'ani and Berprestasi values heavily dominate the feed, leaving the Peduli value minimally represented, resulting in passive parents being unaware of its application. Furthermore, a content gap exists: the school predominantly posts daily documentation that parents have already received via WhatsApp, whereas parents expressed a desire for structured information, such as annual program overviews and educational content on specific issues like anti-bullying.

Engagement Data and Human Resources

As of April 22, 2026, the @sditarbiyatulummah Instagram account has 545 followers and 616 posts. The last 90 days generated 528 likes and 17 comments. Event-based content, such as a Reels video covering New Student Admission (SPMB) observations with a psychologist, achieved the highest metrics (56 likes, 4 comments, 812 views). In contrast, daily documentation averages only 16 likes.

The strategy is supported by parent enthusiasm, adequate basic infrastructure (Wi-Fi, devices), foundation backing via routine meetings, and naturally occurring daily events. However, a major inhibiting factor is limited human resources. Both the school and the foundation rely on a single-handler system (one person managing administrative duties and social media), leading to reactive promotion planning and slow response times to audience interactions.

School and Foundation Collaboration

Observational and interview data show that collaboration between the school and the foundation is currently one-way, initiated solely by the school (e.g., occasional collaboration posts on Instagram). The foundation acts at a strategic level by overseeing the QUALITAS values during routine meetings, but technical execution relies entirely on the school's solo admin. Despite hosting joint annual events (e.g., free *takjil* distribution, Ramadhan camps, Independence Day ceremonies), there is no shared content planning or technical coordination between the two entities.

DISCUSSION

Strategic Marketing and Communication Frameworks

The branding strategy implemented by SDI Tarbiyatul Ummah aligns with the segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) framework proposed by Kotler and Armstrong (Alfiyanto, 2020; Sya'adah, 2024), actively addressing a specific psychographic and geographic demographic. From an integrated marketing communication perspective, the school successfully combines multiple channels that mutually reinforce a consistent brand message (Wahyunto et al., 2024; Saputri et al., 2023). The division of tasks between teachers and the admin reflects a whole-organization marketing approach (Wahyunto et al., 2024), while the prime-time scheduling demonstrates an application of customer behavior principles to build digital brand equity (Kim, 2021; France et al., 2025).

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and Platform Dynamics

The organic distribution mechanism, where parents repost school documentation, operates effectively as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Because this user-generated content features authentic documentation rather than direct institutional promotion, it is highly effective in building audience trust (Arisanto & Fitriyah, 2025; Reitsamer et al., 2026). The identified customer journeys confirm that social media serves dual functions: as a discovery tool for proactive seekers and a confirmation tool for those who discover the brand offline (Shams et al., 2024). This highlights the necessity of selecting platforms that align with target audience interaction patterns.

Implications of Content Gaps and Resource Constraints

The imbalance in communicating the *QUALITAS* tagline poses a risk to brand trust, which relies on the consistency between the brand promise and the tangible evidence consumers witness (Shams et al., 2024). The identified content gap suggests that production is currently driven by ease of creation rather than audience needs analysis. Effective content marketing must answer specific consumer information needs (Reitsamer et al., 2026).

The engagement data confirms that curated, event-based content outperforms routine documentation. However, optimizing this engagement is severely hindered by the single-handler HR structure. The absence of a dedicated, structured team is a primary constraint that can lead to the failure of digital marketing strategies and inconsistent content management (Boom-Carcamo et al., 2024; Arisanto & Fitriyah, 2025).

Co-Branding Potential and Novelty

The disparity between the foundation's strategic oversight and the lack of technical coordination is the root cause of suboptimal cross-account collaboration (Oktaviani & Sutarsih, 2024). The shared annual events present a massive, untapped opportunity for a co-branding strategy, allowing both entities to expand their reach and strengthen credibility (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). Islamic educational institutions leveraging their parent organization's network can build brand awareness more rapidly (Munawwaroh & Rahayu, 2024).

The condition of SDI Tarbiyatul Ummah shares similarities with previous findings indicating that private school branding constraints can be overcome through HR capacity building, work system improvements, and external collaboration (Ariskawanti, n.d.; Budiarti et al., 2023). However, this study contributes to existing literature by introducing two novelty dimensions: identifying a specific content gap directly from the parents' perspective, and repositioning the overseeing foundation as a necessary active partner in the execution of digital marketing, rather than merely an evaluator.

CONCLUSION

This study found that SDI Tarbiyatul Ummah has implemented a digital branding strategy that relies on authentic content based on daily activity documentation, organically distributed through eWOM mechanisms by parents. The tagline "The School of the *QUALITAS* Generation" has successfully formed a positive impression in the minds of parents, and social media has proven to play two important roles: as a medium for discovery and as a medium for confirmation.

However, there are several systemic weaknesses: content planning is still reactive, the representation of the *Peduli* (Caring) value in the content is minimal compared to the other two values, a content gap was found between the produced content and the actual needs of the parents, and there is an absence of a data-driven evaluation system. Collaboration between the school and

the foundation is also still one-way due to the lack of a coordination mechanism at the technical operational level.

This study recommends: (1) the development of a joint content calendar that integrates the agendas of the school and the foundation; (2) establishing a media coordination mechanism that involves the operational levels of both institutions; (3) content diversification to address the actual needs of parents, including educational content and annual program information; (4) optimizing content distribution to TikTok; (5) implementing a simple data-driven evaluation system. This study contributes to the school branding literature by identifying the foundation's role not merely as an evaluator, but as an active partner in the digital branding ecosystem of private schools.

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