

Strategic Public Relations Management in Building the Brand Image of Islamic Schools in a Muslim-Minority Context: A Multiple Case Study

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Abstract

This study investigates how strategic public relations (PR) management contributes to the construction of brand image and institutional legitimacy in Islamic schools operating within a Muslim-minority context in Southern Thailand. Using an interpretivist qualitative multiple-case design, the study examined Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah in Yala and Madrasah Darussalam in Narathiwat. Data were generated from seven purposively selected informants two principals, three teachers, and two students through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed through iterative coding, within-case thematic analysis, and cross-case comparison. The findings show that positive brand image was constructed less through promotional intensity than through community engagement, network-based collaboration, value-driven communication, leadership visibility, stakeholder trust, and educational differentiation. In the minority setting, socio-political sensitivity, educational competition, and multicultural communication shaped how Islamic identity was communicated and evaluated. Across the cases, stakeholders interpreted school image through the perceived consistency between institutional messages and everyday educational, ethical, and social practices. The study therefore conceptualizes brand image as a relational and legitimacy-based outcome produced through accumulated stakeholder experience rather than communication exposure alone. Practically, Islamic schools in plural environments should prioritize sustained stakeholder relationships, transparent communication, credible educational quality, and alignment between religious identity and observable organizational practice; these findings also provide a context-sensitive basis for strengthening strategic PR in faith-based education.

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Introduction

In contemporary education, institutional brand image has become strategically important because schools and other educational organizations compete not only for enrolment but also for trust, legitimacy, stakeholder commitment, and long-term social support (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Chapleo, 2015; Pinar et al., 2014). Educational branding, however, cannot be reduced to logos, slogans, promotional campaigns, or digital visibility; it is shaped by the interaction among organizational identity, educational performance, stakeholder experience, and communication across multiple channels (Chapleo, 2015; Dean et al., 2016; Broucker et al., 2021). Research on higher-education marketing and branding further shows that perceived quality, internal brand enactment, and stakeholder experience contribute to brand equity and behavioral intentions, indicating that credible educational brands emerge when institutional promises are supported by experienced service and organizational behavior (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Pinar et al.,

2014; Sultan & Wong, 2019). The experiential and symbolic dimensions of educational brands are also shaped by stakeholder participation and perceptions of institutional personality, making educational brand meaning inherently relational rather than fully controlled by management (Dean et al., 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Chapleo & Clark, 2016). This relational character is particularly important for schools whose identity is explicitly religious, because their public image is evaluated simultaneously through pedagogical quality, ethical conduct, cultural meaning, and social contribution rather than through promotional communication alone (Chapleo, 2015; Dean et al., 2016; Broucker et al., 2021).

Strategic public relations provides a useful theoretical lens for explaining this process (Grunig, 2006; Ledingham, 2003; Cheng, 2018). Contemporary PR scholarship conceptualizes public relations as a strategic management and relationship-management function rather than merely as publicity or information dissemination (Grunig, 2006; Ledingham, 2003; Cheng, 2018). From this perspective, organizational effectiveness depends partly on the quality of relationships established with relevant publics, while trust, openness, involvement, investment, commitment, and satisfaction develop through repeated interaction and relationship-cultivation practices (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2009a). Empirical relationship-management research similarly demonstrates that cultivation strategies are associated with relationship-quality outcomes and that public engagement is multidimensional, reciprocal, and context dependent (Ki & Hon, 2009b; Dhanesh, 2017; Cheng, 2018). Two-way communication and organizational listening further strengthen an institution's capacity to understand stakeholder expectations and adjust communication and behavior accordingly (Macnamara, 2016a; Macnamara, 2016b; Kang & Park, 2017). Studies of leadership and internal communication also show that symmetrical communication and authentic leadership support stronger employee-organization relationships, reinforcing the proposition that communication becomes strategically valuable when it is embedded in organizational practice (Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014; Kang & Park, 2017).

Brand image becomes organizationally consequential through institutional legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Bitektine, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017). Legitimacy concerns generalized judgments that an organization and its actions are appropriate, credible, and socially acceptable within a particular normative and institutional environment (Suchman, 1995; Bitektine, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017). Such judgments depend not only on formal claims but also on how stakeholders interpret consistency or decoupling between organizational discourse and observable practice (Crilly et al., 2016; Bitektine, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017). Stakeholder theory complements this perspective by emphasizing that organizational sustainability depends on multiple groups whose interests, power, expectations, and interpretations shape organizational outcomes (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997; Parmar et al., 2010). In educational branding, this means that institutional image is partly co-constructed by parents, students, teachers, alumni, community leaders, religious actors, and institutional partners rather than being fully produced by the school itself (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Parmar et al., 2010; Dean et al., 2016). Research on internal brand co-creation and multichannel communication supports this interpretation by showing that brand meanings emerge through interactions among internal and external stakeholders and through different communication environments (Chapleo & Clark, 2016; Dean et al., 2016; Broucker et al., 2021).

These theoretical relationships become more complex in Muslim-minority contexts (Liow, 2010; Raihani et al., 2016; Arphattananon, 2018). Islamic education in Southern Thailand is

embedded in a historically distinctive Malay-Muslim environment in which religious identity, linguistic and cultural traditions, national educational requirements, and broader political sensitivities intersect. Research has shown that schooling in Thailand operates within contested multicultural conditions and that Muslim education in the southern border provinces involves continuing negotiation between local cultural-religious identities and national institutional expectations (Liow, 2010; Raihani et al., 2016; Arphattananon, 2018). Studies specifically addressing Islamic education in the region also describe efforts to preserve Islamic identity while adapting institutional arrangements, teaching, and educational practice to national standards and changing social demands (Raihani et al., 2016; Wekke et al., 2019; Assalihee & Boonsuk, 2023). More recent evidence from Southern Thai private Islamic schools indicates that educational quality, teacher professional development, student-centered pedagogy, and responsiveness to contemporary competencies remain important institutional priorities (Assalihee & Boonsuk, 2023; Assalihee et al., 2024; Brauckmann et al., 2023). These conditions make reputation and legitimacy especially sensitive to how religious identity is enacted and interpreted in everyday educational and community relations (Raihani et al., 2016; Assalihee & Boonsuk, 2023; Assalihee et al., 2024).

In this setting, strategic communication is inseparable from the enactment of institutional identity (Raihani et al., 2016; Arphattananon, 2018; Wekke et al., 2019). Islamic schools must communicate a recognizable religious mission to Muslim communities while simultaneously demonstrating professionalism, educational relevance, social openness, and compatibility with a plural national environment (Liow, 2010; Raihani et al., 2016; Assalihee & Boonsuk, 2023). Southern Thailand scholarship has examined diversity teaching, identity maintenance, educational adaptation, institutional continuity, and negotiation between national and local expectations (Raihani et al., 2016; Arphattananon, 2018; Wekke et al., 2019). Educational branding research, by contrast, has concentrated on differentiation, internal branding, brand equity, multichannel communication, and the relationship between experienced service quality and brand image (Chapleo, 2015; Clark et al., 2020; Sultan & Wong, 2019). PR relationship scholarship has developed robust explanations of organization-public relationships, engagement, listening, and trust (Cheng, 2018; Dhanesh, 2017; Ki & Hon, 2009b). Although these literatures are individually well developed, they remain insufficiently integrated for explaining how a faith-based school in a minority context converts religious identity and everyday organizational practice into stakeholder trust, institutional legitimacy, and a sustainable brand image (Cheng, 2018; Broucker et al., 2021; Raihani et al., 2016).

The unresolved problem is therefore not merely whether Islamic schools communicate effectively, but how communication, stakeholder relationships, organizational behavior, and context interact in the social construction of institutional image (Grunig, 2006; Chapleo, 2015; Suchman, 1995). Existing branding models may overemphasize differentiation or communication outputs when the credibility of a minority religious institution depends on consistency between its claimed identity and the educational and social experiences of its publics (Pinar et al., 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Broucker et al., 2021). Relationship-management theory explains how organizations cultivate publics, but it requires contextual extension to settings in which identity and legitimacy are simultaneously religious, educational, cultural, and socio-political (Grunig, 2006; Ledingham, 2003; Cheng, 2018). Southern Thailand scholarship, conversely, has illuminated identity, curriculum, diversity, and educational reform but has given comparatively less attention to strategic PR as a mechanism through which institutional conduct becomes interpreted as trust, legitimacy, and brand

meaning (Liow, 2010; Raihani et al., 2016; Assalihee et al., 2024). This constitutes a substantive research gap at the intersection of strategic communication, educational branding, and minority Islamic education.

Addressing this gap, the present study integrates strategic PR relationship management, educational branding, stakeholder theory, and institutional legitimacy to examine Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah in Yala and Madrasah Darussalam in Narathiwat. It conceptualizes brand image as a relational and legitimacy-based outcome that emerges when stakeholders interpret communication in conjunction with educational quality, organizational behavior, community engagement, leadership practice, and the enactment of Islamic values. The study aims to examine how strategic PR management is implemented in the two schools, identify the organizational and relational conditions that support positive brand-image formation, and explain the contextual challenges that shape legitimacy-building in a Muslim-minority environment. By comparing two information-rich cases, the study seeks to contribute a context-sensitive explanation of how religious educational identity is translated into stakeholder trust and socially recognized institutional credibility, thereby extending educational branding beyond a predominantly promotional interpretation.

Method

This study employed an interpretivist qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how strategic public relations practices, institutional identity, stakeholder relationships, and brand image are constructed and interpreted within their social and organizational contexts. A multiple-case design was appropriate because it enables intensive examination of contextually embedded processes while allowing systematic comparison across cases and the identification of convergent and divergent patterns (Crowe et al., 2011; Rashid et al., 2019; Tracy, 2010). Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah in Yala and Madrasah Darussalam in Narathiwat were selected purposively because both are Islamic educational institutions located in Southern Thailand, operate within a Muslim-minority national context, maintain relationships with internal and external stakeholders, and provide analytically comparable yet institutionally distinct settings. Each school was first treated as an individual case, after which cross-case comparison was used to identify recurring relational practices, enabling conditions, and contextual constraints.

Participants were selected purposively on the basis of direct involvement in, or experience with, institutional communication and educational practice. Seven informants participated: two principals, three teachers, and two students. This focused sampling strategy prioritized information-rich perspectives rather than statistical representativeness, consistent with the principle that qualitative adequacy depends on the specificity and information power of the sample in relation to the research aim (Malterud et al., 2016; Kallio et al., 2016; Crowe et al., 2011). Data were generated through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Interviews lasted approximately 3 hours and 10 minutes per informant and were conducted primarily in Malay and/or the local Thai dialect according to participant preference. The interviews were transcribed, transliterated where necessary, and translated into English; contextual notes were retained, and translations were checked through bilingual comparison with the original-language transcripts to reduce semantic loss in cross-language interpretation (Temple & Young, 2004; Squires, 2009; van Nes et al., 2010). Observations covered educational, religious, community, and communication activities, while documents included institutional policies, communication materials, brochures, school publications, social-media content, and branding-related artifacts.

Table 1. Informant Profile

No	Initials	Remarks	Location
1	MD1	Principal	Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah Yala
2	MD2	Principal	Madrasah Darussalam Narathiwat
3	UTZ2	Teacher	Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah Yala
4	UTZ2	Teacher	Madrasah Darussalam Narathiwat
5	UTZ3	Teacher	Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah Yala
6	PJ1	Students	Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah Yala
7	PJ2	Students	Madrasah Darussalam Narathiwat

Data analysis proceeded iteratively through familiarization, initial coding, category development, within-case thematic analysis, cross-case comparison, and interpretive synthesis. Interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documentary materials were repeatedly reviewed before open codes were generated around PR practices, stakeholder relationships, Islamic values, institutional identity, educational quality, community engagement, leadership, trust, differentiation, and brand-image perceptions. Thematic analysis was conducted as a transparent process of moving from coded meaning units to categories and higher-order themes, while constant comparison was used to examine similarities and differences between cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Rashid et al., 2019). Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was used to organize the corpus and maintain an auditable analytical record. A working codebook, repeated transcript review, peer debriefing, and discussion of alternative interpretations were used to support coding consistency; because the study was interpretive, analytical quality was addressed through transparency and reflexive comparison rather than statistical inter-coder reliability.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through data-source, methodological, and cross-case triangulation; member clarification of selected interpretations; prolonged engagement with the field; peer debriefing; and maintenance of an audit trail. These procedures were intended to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency in the thematic interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tracy, 2010). Particular attention was paid to cross-language validity because translation is itself an interpretive act that can alter culturally situated meanings (Temple & Young, 2004; Squires, 2009; van Nes et al., 2010). Ethical safeguards included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, use of coded participant identifiers, and sensitivity to religious and cultural norms in the Muslim-minority setting. The study record available for this manuscript did not contain a separate institutional ethics-approval identifier; consequently, no approval number is reported.

Result and Discussion

Community-Integrated Strategic Public Relations: Engagement, Networks, and Value-Driven Communication

Cross-case analysis showed that both Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah Yala and Madrasah Darussalam Narathiwat relied on a community-integrated PR orientation in which institutional image was cultivated through sustained relationships and visible organizational conduct rather than episodic promotion. Three mutually reinforcing practices were evident across the cases: community engagement, network-based collaboration, and value-driven communication. These practices linked formal communication with everyday encounters involving parents, religious leaders, alumni,

educational institutions, community organizations, government actors, and local residents, thereby making PR part of institutional relationship management rather than a separate publicity function.

Community engagement was the most visible relational practice. Both schools participated in religious gatherings, social service, community education, and activities involving parents and local leaders. Observations indicated that interaction frequently continued after formal programs, with leaders and teachers speaking directly with community members in informal settings. This continuity suggests that relational proximity was built through repeated presence and service, allowing community members to evaluate the schools through direct experience rather than through mediated messages alone.

One principal explained:

“Relations with the community are not only carried out when the madrasah has a program or wants to introduce the school. We try to be present in community activities, help when there are social and religious activities, and maintain communication with local figures. In this way, people see madrasahs as part of them, not as stand-alone institutions.” (MD1, 15 June 2025)

The principal’s account was consistent with observational evidence: the school’s presence in routine religious and social activities positioned community relations as an ongoing institutional responsibility. Across the cases, this pattern linked visibility with participation. Institutional image was reinforced when stakeholders encountered the madrasah as an active community member, indicating that the credibility of communication depended on the social experiences through which the institution became familiar and useful to its publics.

The second practice was network-based collaboration. Both madrasahs maintained ties with educational institutions, community leaders, alumni, Islamic organizations, and other external partners. These networks supported educational programs, community activities, information exchange, and access to resources. Their strategic significance lay not simply in expanding institutional reach, but in embedding the schools within relational structures through which cooperation, endorsement, and community support could be sustained.

“Madrasahs do have relationships with several parties outside the school. There is cooperation with educational institutions, community leaders, alumni, and several organizations. The collaboration helps us in running educational programs and community activities. For us, the network is important because madrasahs are impossible to develop on their own. The support of various parties also makes the community more trusting of the institution.” (MD2, 22 June 2025)

Observation of joint activities showed that these networks involved reciprocal communication, coordination, and exchange of community input rather than one-directional promotion. The cross-case pattern therefore indicates that external relationships functioned as collaborative infrastructures: they enabled program implementation while simultaneously exposing the schools’ practices to stakeholder evaluation. In this sense, network participation contributed to brand image indirectly through the quality and continuity of institutional relationships.

The third practice was value-driven communication. Leaders and teachers repeatedly referred to trust, care, moderation (*wasathiyah*), service, and social responsibility as principles that should be visible in institutional conduct. The data indicate that Islamic values were not treated only as messages to be communicated; they operated as behavioral standards against which teachers, leaders, and the institution itself were expected to be judged by community members.

"Teachers not only teach in the classroom, but also have to show the values taught to students. When we talk about trust, care and moderation, the community must be able to see it in our service and behavior. Therefore, madrasah communication with the community must be in accordance with Islamic values." (UTZ1, 8 July 2025)

Another teacher emphasized that public trust was based on observed institutional behavior:

"People know madrassas not only from what is published. They see how teachers serve students, how madrassas help community activities and how our relationship with parents is. When the behavior of the madrasah is in accordance with Islamic values, the public will believe. For us, trust is more important than just a lot of news or publications about madrassas." (UTZ2, 19 July 2025)

Taken together, the interview, observation, and documentary evidence show that community engagement, institutional networking, and value-driven communication were mutually reinforcing. Engagement created relational proximity, networks extended collaborative capacity, and value-based conduct provided a recognizable basis for assessing institutional identity. The resulting brand image was therefore associated with accumulated stakeholder experiences of educational service, social participation, and ethical behavior rather than with communication exposure alone.

Enabling Conditions for Brand-Image Formation: Leadership, Trust, and Institutional Differentiation

Three interrelated enabling conditions supported positive brand-image formation across the two cases: leadership, stakeholder trust, and institutional differentiation. Although they appeared in different forms at each school, they operated as connected mechanisms. Leadership shaped the consistency of internal and external practice, trust accumulated through repeated stakeholder experiences, and differentiation became credible when the distinctive Islamic-educational identity was enacted in everyday programs rather than merely asserted in promotional language.

Leadership functioned as an organizational bridge between internal management and external relationships. Observations showed principals communicating with teachers, students, parents, community leaders, and educational partners, while also representing the schools in community interactions. Their visibility made leadership practice part of the evidence through which stakeholders interpreted openness, consistency, and institutional direction.

As MD1 explained:

"The head of the madrasah must be the first to show direction to teachers and the community. We not only take care of the school administration, but also build relationships with parents, religious leaders and the community. If the leadership is open and consistent, it is easier for the community to trust the madrasah."

The evidence suggests that leadership influenced brand image indirectly by establishing and modeling organizational practices that stakeholders could observe. Leadership was therefore not simply a symbolic feature of the institutional brand; it was a mechanism through which internal expectations regarding service, communication, and values were translated into external stakeholder experiences.

Stakeholder trust was the second recurring enabling condition. Across interviews, trust was described as cumulative and experience based, particularly in relation to educational service, openness of communication, responsiveness, and the perceived development of students. This

interpretation positions trust as an outcome of repeated institutional encounters rather than a short-term response to promotional activity.

“Public trust does not come quickly. Parents see how their children are served, how their academic development is, and how madrassas convey information. We try to keep the relationship open and provide good service. When parents feel confident in the education provided, they usually support madrasah programs and pass on their experiences to other communities.” (MD2, 24 June 2025)

This account indicates that trust accumulated through repeated experiences involving educational quality, communication, and institutional responsiveness. Parents’ willingness to support programs and relay their experiences to others also suggests a social-reputational process in which stakeholder evaluation could circulate beyond direct school-community encounters.

Institutional differentiation constituted the third enabling condition. The distinctiveness reported by participants centered on the integration of religious learning, academic development, Arabic and Malay language competencies, Qur’anic memorization, and character formation. The data indicate that these elements functioned as brand differentiators because they were embedded in the students’ educational experience.

“What makes this madrasah different is the program that combines religious education with academic ability. Students not only learn religious science, but also Arabic and Malay, memorize the Qur’an, and take part in character development.” (UTZ3, 12 July 2025)

Observation likewise identified religious learning, Arabic and Malay language activities, Qur’anic memorization, and character development as recurring components of school life. The student perspective reinforced the cross-case interpretation that institutional identity acquired meaning through routine practices. Differentiation was therefore experienced internally before it was communicated externally.

“The identity of the madrasah is not just a name or slogan, but it is seen in the activities of students every day.” (PJ1, 21 July 2025)

The evidence therefore indicates that differentiation was credible when it corresponded with observable educational practice. The distinctive Islamic identity of the madrasahs was not only articulated to external publics; it was enacted through programs, student routines, and interpersonal conduct. This consistency allowed stakeholders to interpret differentiation as an authentic institutional characteristic rather than a promotional claim.

Contextual Constraints in a Muslim-Minority Environment

The cross-case analysis identified three contextual constraints that shaped brand-image formation: socio-political sensitivity, educational competition, and multicultural communication. These conditions did not merely create obstacles to PR; they influenced how institutional identity could be communicated, how relationships were managed, and which forms of educational and social performance became necessary for maintaining credibility in a Muslim-minority environment.

Socio-political sensitivity required the schools to communicate Islamic identity carefully while maintaining openness toward the wider social environment. Participants emphasized transparency and the need to prevent misunderstanding, while observations showed leaders and teachers explaining school programs and responding to community input. Communication therefore served both an informative and a legitimacy-management function.

“In a society like in Southern Thailand, we have to be careful when conveying something to the community. Madrasas still maintain Islamic identity, but communication must be open and not cause misunderstandings. We explain the program transparently to parents and the community so that they understand what the madrasah does.” (MD1, 18 June 2025)

Observational evidence was consistent with this account: leaders and teachers communicated institutional programs in a cautious and relatively open manner and responded to questions from community members. This pattern indicates that strategic communication was used to reduce ambiguity around religious identity and to demonstrate that the schools’ activities were educationally and socially intelligible to diverse stakeholders.

Educational competition constituted a second contextual constraint. Participants compared the madrasas with public and private schools that possessed stronger facilities, technology, or contemporary learning programs. Competitive pressure therefore required the institutions to strengthen teacher quality, student services, and program relevance while retaining the Islamic characteristics that supported institutional distinctiveness.

“Public schools and private schools have better facilities, and there are even schools that use technology and interesting learning programs. Therefore, madrasas should not only rely on the old name. We must improve the quality of teachers, improve services to students, and develop programs that meet the needs of the times.” (MD2, 27 June 2025)

Observation confirmed efforts to combine religious programs with contemporary educational practices and technology-supported activities. The cross-case evidence suggests that differentiation based on Islamic identity alone was insufficient; credibility also depended on demonstrating educational relevance, service quality, and responsiveness to changing learner and community expectations.

The third challenge concerned multicultural communication. Participants described linguistic and cultural diversity as requiring careful interpersonal communication with parents and community members. The schools’ Islamic identity was therefore expressed through socially recognizable practices respect, service, tolerance, and assistance—rather than through boundary making or social closure.

“Here the people have diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Teachers must understand how to talk to parents and the community so that there is no misunderstanding. Islamic values must be shown through good attitudes, respect for others and helping the community.” (UTZ2, 14 July 2025)

UTZ3 similarly emphasized that maintaining Islamic identity did not require social closure:

“Our Islamic identity is not to separate ourselves from society, but to be the basis for showing morals, tolerance and mutual respect.” (UTZ3, 9 August 2025)

Across the two cases, the challenge was not simply to preserve a distinctive Islamic identity, but to translate that identity into forms of conduct that remained intelligible and credible within a religiously and culturally diverse environment. Socio-political sensitivity required transparency, competition required educational adaptation, and multicultural communication required respectful identity enactment. Together, these constraints demonstrate that brand image was negotiated within context rather than produced by communication in isolation.

Discussion

The first major finding is that strategic PR in the two madrasas functioned primarily as relationship management rather than as promotional communication. This pattern is consistent with the strategic-management tradition, which defines PR through its contribution to organizational relationships and decision processes, and with relationship-management theory, which places sustained organization-public relationships at the center of PR effectiveness (Grunig, 2006; Ledingham, 2003; Cheng, 2018). It also accords with empirical work showing that relationship-cultivation practices are associated with trust, commitment, and other relationship-quality outcomes (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Ki & Hon, 2009a; Ki & Hon, 2009b). The present study extends those findings by showing that, in minority Islamic education, relational communication was credible only when stakeholders could verify it through community presence, educational service, and institutional behavior. Thus, communication did not substitute for organizational performance; it created the relational conditions through which performance became visible and interpretable.

A second comparison concerns educational branding. Prior branding studies emphasize differentiation, brand equity, internal brand enactment, multichannel communication, and stakeholder experience as central to educational brand formation (Chapleo, 2015; Pinar et al., 2014; Broucker et al., 2021). Research on internal brand co-creation further suggests that brand meaning is produced through stakeholder experience and interaction rather than simply transmitted from management (Dean et al., 2016; Chapleo & Clark, 2016; Clark et al., 2020). The current findings support this experiential interpretation: PJ1's statement that madrasah identity is visible in daily student activities demonstrates that the brand was encountered as lived educational practice. This is also compatible with Sultan and Wong's (2019) evidence that service quality and trust are central to brand image and behavioral intention. The contribution here is to show that, for faith-based schools in a minority setting, stakeholder experience includes not only service quality but also judgments about whether religious values, educational standards, and social conduct are mutually consistent.

Third, the findings connect brand image with institutional legitimacy more explicitly than conventional educational-branding accounts. Legitimacy theory argues that organizations are judged against socially constructed expectations of appropriateness and acceptability, while legitimacy is continuously interpreted and can be weakened when organizational claims become decoupled from practice (Suchman, 1995; Bitektine, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017). Crilly et al. (2016) likewise demonstrate that stakeholders interpret organizational claims through cues about consistency and decoupling. In the two cases, Islamic identity did not automatically confer legitimacy. It became credible when stakeholders associated that identity with educational quality, ethical conduct, service, moderation, and responsiveness. This finding reframes school brand image as a legitimacy-based evaluation: a positive image emerged when the communicated identity was corroborated by organizational behavior.

Fourth, the results refine stakeholder theory by positioning stakeholders as co-producers of institutional meaning rather than only as constituencies to be managed. Classical stakeholder scholarship emphasizes the plurality of groups that affect and are affected by organizations and the need to recognize differences in interests and salience (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997; Parmar et al., 2010). In the present cases, parents, students, teachers, alumni, religious leaders, community members, and institutional partners did more than receive information. Their experiences, participation, evaluations, and interpersonal communication circulated interpretations

of the schools. This recursive process resonates with research on public engagement and digitally mediated relational outcomes, which shows that publics participate actively in relationship and meaning formation (Dhanesh, 2017; Men & Tsai, 2015; Men et al., 2018). The brand was therefore co-constructed through social relationships, which limits the extent to which management can control institutional image through message production alone.

Fifth, leadership emerged as an indirect but important reputational mechanism. Research on strategic internal communication shows that leadership behavior influences symmetrical communication, employee relationships, and relational outcomes, while internal-branding research demonstrates that organizational members must understand and enact brand values for external claims to remain credible (Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014; Clark et al., 2020). Chapleo and Clark (2016) similarly highlight the complexity of internal brand processes in educational institutions. The principals in this study contributed to brand image not by acting as symbolic spokespersons alone, but by creating visible patterns of openness, service, coordination, and community participation that teachers and stakeholders could experience. Leadership therefore linked internal organizational culture with external reputation; its branding effect was mediated by the consistency of institutional practice.

Sixth, the Muslim-minority context changes the meaning of both communication and differentiation. Studies of Southern Thailand have documented the continuing negotiation among Islamic identity, cultural diversity, national educational expectations, and socio-political pressures (Liow, 2010; Raihani et al., 2016; Arphattananon, 2018). Wekke et al. (2019) likewise describe institutional continuity and change as a balancing process between national interests and local Muslim aspirations. The present findings are consistent with this literature but add a strategic-communication dimension. The participants did not describe Islamic identity as a basis for social withdrawal; instead, they translated it into publicly intelligible practices such as service, respect, moderation, tolerance, educational responsibility, and community participation. This process may be understood as identity translation: religious distinctiveness was maintained, but its legitimacy depended on how values were enacted in relations with heterogeneous publics.

Seventh, the findings on educational competition and adaptation align with evidence that Southern Thai private Islamic schools face pressure to modernize teaching, improve professional capacity, and develop competencies relevant to contemporary education (Assalihee & Boonsuk, 2023; Assalihee et al., 2024; Brauckmann et al., 2023). The two madrasas did not respond to competition by abandoning religious differentiation; instead, they sought to combine religious learning, language development, Qur'anic memorization, character formation, and contemporary educational practices. This pattern is best described as adaptive rather than assimilative. It reinforces branding research showing that differentiation is credible when it is internally enacted and supported by service performance (Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Sultan & Wong, 2019; Dean et al., 2016). In minority faith-based education, competitive positioning is therefore inseparable from the institution's capacity to modernize without creating a perceived rupture between educational innovation and religious identity.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating these strands into a context-sensitive relational-legitimacy explanation of school brand image. Across the cases, the evidence supports an interpretive sequence in which strategic PR practices facilitate stakeholder interaction; interaction generates stakeholder experience; experience enables judgments of consistency between institutional identity

and practice; perceived consistency contributes to trust and legitimacy; and these evaluations accumulate as brand image. This sequence is not proposed as a linear causal model, because the qualitative evidence indicates reciprocal relationships among communication, experience, trust, and reputation. Rather, it identifies the mechanism that is underdeveloped when PR, branding, stakeholder, and minority-education literatures are considered separately. In particular, the study shows that the strategic value of PR is not that it directly creates a positive brand, but that it organizes relationships through which institutional claims can be repeatedly verified, contested, and socially validated.

The theoretical implications follow from this mechanism. For PR scholarship, the findings support a move from communication-centered analysis toward relationship processes that include observable organizational behavior, listening, and stakeholder interpretation (Macnamara, 2016a; Macnamara, 2016b; Cheng, 2018). For educational-branding research, they suggest that brand image in faith-based institutions should be modeled as an experience- and legitimacy-dependent construct rather than as an output of promotion or differentiation alone (Chapleo, 2015; Broucker et al., 2021; Sultan & Wong, 2019). For stakeholder and legitimacy scholarship, the cases illustrate how institutional acceptance is co-produced through repeated local interactions in which multiple publics assess whether identity claims are socially and educationally credible (Suchman, 1995; Parmar et al., 2010; Bitektine, 2011). The practical implication is that Islamic-school leaders should invest in stakeholder listening, sustained community participation, transparent communication, teacher and service quality, and internal enactment of institutional values before increasing promotional visibility.

The study also has implications for communication in plural and politically sensitive environments. Organizational listening research emphasizes that legitimacy and trust are weakened when communication privileges institutional voice over stakeholder input (Macnamara, 2016a; Macnamara, 2016b; Kang & Park, 2017). The Southern Thailand cases suggest that transparent explanation, respectful interpersonal communication, and community participation can reduce ambiguity around institutional identity while allowing schools to remain religiously distinctive. Digital communication may complement these practices, but existing research indicates that online engagement produces relational value when it conveys human presence and dialogic interaction rather than merely increasing message frequency (Men & Tsai, 2015; Men et al., 2018; Broucker et al., 2021). Accordingly, digital visibility should extend rather than replace the offline relational practices through which credibility is established.

Several limitations delimit these conclusions. First, the study examined only two Islamic schools and seven informants, so the findings provide analytical and contextual transferability rather than statistical generalization. Although purposive, information-rich sampling is appropriate for qualitative inquiry, future studies should include parents, alumni, religious leaders, community representatives, government actors, and institutional partners more systematically to broaden the range of stakeholder interpretations (Malterud et al., 2016; Tracy, 2010; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Second, the evidence is cross-sectional and interpretive; longitudinal work is needed to determine how relationships, trust, legitimacy, and brand meanings change over time. Third, cross-language interviewing and translation may introduce interpretive loss despite bilingual checking and contextual notes (Temple & Young, 2004; Squires, 2009; van Nes et al., 2010). Fourth, the study does not quantify the relative influence of PR practices, educational quality, or institutional identity on

brand image. Mixed-method and longitudinal designs could test the proposed relational-legitimacy sequence while preserving sensitivity to context. Finally, the study gives limited attention to digital communication; future research should examine how online and offline stakeholder experiences interact in the construction of minority faith-based school brands.

Conclusion

This multiple-case study demonstrates that the brand image of Ma'had Al-Bi'that Ad-Diniah Yala and Madrasah Darussalam Narathiwat is constructed primarily through sustained, community-integrated public relations rather than promotional intensity alone. Community engagement, network-based collaboration, and value-driven communication created relational spaces in which stakeholders could evaluate educational quality, leadership practice, Islamic values, service, and institutional responsiveness; leadership, accumulated trust, and authentic educational differentiation strengthened this process, while socio-political sensitivity, educational competition, and multicultural communication constrained how identity could be expressed. The central contribution is a relational-legitimacy interpretation of educational branding: strategic PR facilitates stakeholder interaction, stakeholder experience enables judgments of consistency between institutional claims and practice, and those judgments contribute to trust, legitimacy, and ultimately brand image. In a Muslim-minority setting, Islamic identity becomes institutionally credible when it is enacted through educational quality, ethical conduct, community contribution, moderation, and constructive engagement with diverse publics. Practically, Islamic schools should prioritize stakeholder listening, transparent communication, internal enactment of values, service quality, and sustained community relationships before expanding promotional visibility. These findings are context-bound to two schools and seven informants, but they provide an analytically transferable basis for future longitudinal and mixed-method research on strategic PR, legitimacy, and faith-based educational branding.

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