

Synergizing Public Relations and Community Engagement for Sustainable School Branding

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Abstract

This study examines how collaborative public relations management shapes community-based branding at a pesantren-based secondary school in Indonesia, where market-oriented branding frameworks may be insufficient. Using an intrinsic case-study design within a constructivist paradigm, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 16 informants across six stakeholder categories, participant observation, and document analysis at SMA Unggulan Haf-Sa BPPT Genggong, East Java. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were constructed: (1) parents and alumni act as co-producers of institutional identity through practical support, informal promotion, and financial contribution; (2) community leaders provide social legitimacy that extends the school's reputation through pengajian and village forums; and (3) digital media function as infrastructure for participatory branding, with community networks amplifying institutionally coordinated content. Divergent accounts qualify this picture: collaboration is effortful, concentrated in an active minority, and accompanied by reduced message control. The study specifies relational trust as the mechanism linking community engagement to branding, and proposes a testable coordination–amplification model in which the public relations unit facilitates rather than controls collective identity. The findings ground collaborative and co-creational public relations arguments empirically in a faith-based K–12 setting. In similar settings, public relations units may benefit from prioritizing relationship maintenance over message production, though the trade-off with message control warrants deliberate management.

Keywords: school branding; public relations management; community engagement; relational trust; stakeholder collaboration

Introduction

Competition among educational institutions is intensifying in step with public demands for transparency, accountability, and quality.¹ Schools can no longer rely on promotion alone; they require a durable identity capable of building public trust over time.² School branding is best understood as a strategic process through which educational institutions communicate their values, distinctiveness, and credibility to stakeholders, and interest in the concept has grown in educational management research. Consistent branding is widely argued to strengthen institutional image and encourage public participation, while collaborative branding strategies are associated with stronger enrolment and stakeholder retention.³

Nevertheless, most schools continue to manage their image through internally driven communication that positions the institution as the sole narrator of its identity.⁴ Parents, alumni, and religious leaders are treated as an audience rather than as partners in image-building. Crossley, Elmagrhi, Ntim, and Hurst and Johnston argue that this institution-centered approach constrains both the credibility and the reach of branding, particularly where social legitimacy depends on collective endorsement rather than self-promotion.⁵ The present study examines how collaborative public relations management shapes school branding in the specific context of pesantren-based education in Indonesia.

SMA Unggulan Haf-Sa BPPT Genggong, situated within the Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic boarding-school complex in Probolinggo, East Java, combines a

¹T. Gkrimpizi, V. Peristeras, and I. Magnisalis, "Classification of Barriers to Digital Transformation in Higher Education Institutions: Systematic Literature Review," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 7 (2023): 746, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13070746>; M. A. Mohamed Hashim, I. Tlemsani, and R. Matthews, "Higher Education Strategy in Digital Transformation," *Education and Information Technologies* 27, no. 3 (2022): 3171–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10739-1>.

²A. Rof, A. Bikfalvi, and P. Marques, "Pandemic-Accelerated Digital Transformation of a Born Digital Higher Education Institution: Towards a Customized Multimodal Learning Strategy," *Educational Technology and Society* 25, no. 1 (2022): 124–41.; S. R. Manzoor, J. S. Y. Ho, and A. Al Mahmud, "Revisiting the 'University Image Model' for Higher Education Institutions' Sustainability," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 31, no. 2 (2021): 220–39.

³A. R. Nugraha, I. Bakti, and F. Zubair, "The Branding and Reputation of Islamic Education: Its Impact on Public Perceptions of Islamic Schools, West Java, Indonesia," *Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 8, no. 1 (2026): 459–71, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17722474>.

⁴H. Lundberg and C. Öberg, "Teachers, Researchers, but Not Innovators? Rethinking University–Industry Collaboration," *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* 36, no. 13 (2021): 161–73.

⁵R. M. Crossley, M. H. Elmagrhi, and C. G. Ntim, "Sustainability and Legitimacy Theory: The Case of Sustainable Social and Environmental Practices of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises," *Business Strategy and the Environment* 30, no. 8 (2021): 3740–62, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2837>; B. Hurst and K. A. Johnston, "The Social Imperative in Public Relations: Utilities of Social Impact, Social License and Engagement," *Public Relations Review* 47, no. 2 (2021): 102039, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102039>.

national academic curriculum with pesantren values and draws pupils from several provinces. Its educational model rests on ongoing relationships with a wider community of parents (pupil guardians), alumni, teachers, and local religious and community leaders. In this setting, branding is less a promotional output than a by-product of sustained social relationships: parents support the school informally, alumni return as mentors, and religious figures lend moral endorsement, carrying the school's reputation beyond its immediate locality.

Three considerations make this case analytically interesting. *First*, the rapid growth of private and faith-based schools obliges institutions to establish a distinctive and credible identity.⁶ *Second*, digital channels are reshaping school communication from one-way announcements toward more interactive exchange.⁷ *Third*, pesantren-based schools derive legitimacy from the moral authority of the kiai, intergenerational trust, and community support as much as from market position.⁸

To locate the study, we reviewed literature at the intersection of educational public relations, community engagement, and digital branding. Sources were identified through Scopus and Google Scholar searches (2019–2026), combining the terms school/educational branding, public relations, community engagement, madrasah/pesantren, and digital media, supplemented by backward citation tracing. Rather than summarizing each study in turn, we read across the three bodies of work to surface the tensions that motivate our research questions.

The first body of work concerns public relations and institutional trust. Educational public relations has historically operated as an administrative, information-dissemination activity rather than a dialogic one. Fadillah and Huiquan's review of research from 2013–2022 found a predominant focus on organizational management and perception, with participatory models that treat external stakeholders as active contributors remaining

⁶M. Zainul et al., "Optimizing Social Media and School Websites for Promotional Branding in Indonesian Madrasahs: Achieving Competitive Advantage in the Digital Era," *Munaddhomah* 7, no. 1 (2026): 28–43, <https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v7i1.2170>.

⁷E. C. Cairosa et al., "Trends in Educational Marketing: A View from the Teacher's House," *Scientific Culture* 11, no. 3 (2025): 969–75, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11032567>; R. Hosna et al., "Utilization of Digital Advertising Strategy in Marketing Educational Programs," in *Proceedings—2025 11th International Conference on Education and Technology (ICET 2025)* (IEEE, 2025), 34–39, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICET67257.2025.11290729>.

⁸M. Y. Mahmud et al., "Educational Excellence and Strategic Promotion: Strengthening Islamic School Branding through 7P Integration," *Munaddhomah* 6, no. 4 (2025): 661–76, <https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v6i4.1907>.

rare.⁹ This descriptive tradition sits in tension with a normative turn in the wider field. Grunig's excellence tradition already framed two-way symmetrical communication as the hallmark of effective public relations,¹⁰ and Ledingham and Bruning reframed the field around the management of organization–public relationships rather than the production of messages.¹¹ Botan and Taylor extended this trajectory toward a co-creational perspective in which publics are partners in meaning-making rather than targets of persuasion.¹² More recent work echoes these arguments: Joshi calls for collaborative communication grounded in social justice,¹³ and Wang and Ran argue that collaborative governance opens space for horizontal interaction and shared value creation.¹⁴ The tension, then, is between a descriptive literature that still documents managerial, one-way practice and a normative literature that has long advocated relational and co-creational models yet most of the supporting evidence comes from higher education and the corporate sector, leaving the applicability of these models to K-12 and faith-based schools largely untested.

The second body of work treats community engagement as a driver of institutional legitimacy. Legitimacy theory holds that organizations sustain public acceptance by aligning with community values, while Hurst and Johnston recast engagement as a social license that broadens reach and credibility.¹⁵ Empirically, Arnado and colleagues found that dense social ties among a Catholic school, parents, alums, and the church community produced trust robust enough to stabilize enrolment through pandemic disruption.¹⁶ In

⁹D. Fadillah and Z. Huiquan, "Developing Public Relations as a Foundation for Public Trust: A Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis," *SN Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (2024): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00813-5>.

¹⁰James E. Grunig, ed., *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992).

¹¹John A. Ledingham and Stephen D. Bruning, "Relationship Management in Public Relations: Dimensions of an Organization-Public Relationship," *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 1 (1998): 55–65, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(98\)80020-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(98)80020-9).

¹²Carl H. Botan and Maureen Taylor, "Public Relations: State of the Field," *Journal of Communication* 54, no. 4 (2004): 645–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02649.x>.

¹³B. Joshi, "Building 'Foundational' Linkages between Development Communication and Public Relations: A Collaborative Communication Approach to Development," *Public Relations Review* 48, no. 1 (2022): 102140, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102140>.

¹⁴H. Wang and B. Ran, "Network Governance and Collaborative Governance: A Thematic Analysis on Their Similarities, Differences, and Entanglements," *Public Management Review* 25, no. 6 (2023): 1187–1211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.2011389>.

¹⁵Hurst and Johnston, "The Social Imperative in Public Relations."

¹⁶J. M. Arnado et al., "Trust in Pandemic-Induced Online Learning: Competitive Advantage of Closure and Reputation," *International Journal of Sociology of Education* 10, no. 2 (2021): 193–217, <https://doi.org/10.17583/rise.2021.7088>.

Indonesian Islamic education, Nugraha, Bakti, and Zubair report that branding and reputation jointly account for a substantial share of public attitudes toward Islamic schools in West Java,¹⁷ and Mahmud and colleagues identify the kiai as a moral and symbolic anchor of public trust.¹⁸ A recurring limitation, however, is that community engagement is usually modeled as a background variable rather than examined as a process that public relations units actively coordinate a gap that social-capital theory, which treats relational networks as a resource to be mobilized, is well positioned to address.¹⁹

The third body of work concerns digital platforms. Luque-Martínez, Faraoni, and Doña-Toledo associate graduate identification, information quality, and electronic word-of-mouth with perceived institutional image,²⁰ whereas Prisgunanto and colleagues identify the choice of digital channel as the strongest predictor of institutional image among ASEAN website users.²¹ Zainul and colleagues show two Indonesian madrasahs pursuing divergent strategies one privileging a structured website for credibility, the other Instagram for interactivity both constrained by staffing and technical capacity.²² Prabayanti, Mustaji, and Roesminingsih document how inconsistent visual identity and weak message coordination fragmented a university's digital narrative,²³ and Vitković and colleagues propose integrating artificial intelligence and digital literacy to strengthen cross-platform coherence.²⁴ Throughout this work, digital branding is typically theorized as institutionally produced content; the possibility that a community might co-produce and distribute it receives little attention.

¹⁷Nugraha, Bakti, and Zubair, "The Branding and Reputation of Islamic Education."

¹⁸Mahmud et al., "Educational Excellence and Strategic Promotion."

¹⁹Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal, "Social Capital, Intellectual Capital, and the Organizational Advantage," *Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 2 (1998): 242–66, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1998.533225>.

²⁰T. Luque-Martínez, N. Faraoni, and L. Doña-Toledo, "Reflecting University Image in the Era of Digitalization," *Social Sciences and Humanities Open* 13 (2026): 102350, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102350>.

²¹I. Prisgunanto, I. Pranawukir, and T. Rusmawan, "Digital Public Communication in Image Building: A Survey of ASEAN Official Websites," *Studies in Media and Communication* 13, no. 3 (2025): 170–83, <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v13i3.7565>.

²²Zainul et al., "Optimizing Social Media and School Websites."

²³H. R. Prabayanti, Mustaji, and E. Roesminingsih, "Auditing Social Media Communication Using the SOSTAC Framework to Strengthen the Brand Image of a Higher Education Institution," *Perspektiv Nauki i Obrazovanja* 2025, no. 6 (2025): 792–813, <https://doi.org/10.32744/pse.2025.6.51>.

²⁴B. Vitković et al., "Digital Communication Platforms for Institutional Branding: A Conceptual Review of Learning, Digital Literacy, and AI/ML Integration," *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education* 14, no. 1 (2026): 125–33, <https://doi.org/10.23947/2334-8496-2026-14-1-125-133>.

Read together, these literatures leave three under-addressed spaces. *First*, research remains concentrated in higher education, whereas K-12 schools differ in scale, governance, and stakeholder relations, and pesantren-based schools add a layer of religious legitimacy not captured by secular or corporate frameworks. *Second*, community engagement and public relations management are still, for the most part, studied separately rather than as an integrated process; we found comparatively little work examining how school public relations units coordinate the contributions of parents, alumni, and community leaders into a coherent institutional image. *Third*, studies of branding in pesantren and Islamic education describe branding *outcomes* more often than they explain the collaborative *processes* that produce them. We phrase these as areas where evidence is limited rather than absent, since the fast-moving and multilingual literature makes it difficult to sustain strong claims of complete novelty.

The study is framed by three complementary lenses introduced here, before the analysis, so that they inform rather than merely follow the interpretation. Legitimacy theory explains why external endorsement matters: an institution's standing depends on alignment with the values of those whose approval it seeks.²⁵ Social-capital theory explains how relational networks function as a mobilizable resource, converting goodwill into concrete contributions.²⁶ Social-exchange theory explains the micro-logic of participation, in which sustained reciprocity can shift stakeholders from recipients of information to co-producers of value.²⁷ Together with the relational and co-creational tradition in public relations.²⁸ These lenses justify a design attentive to relationships and processes rather than to messages and outputs alone.

Accordingly, this study examines the role of collaborative public relations management in building community-based school branding at SMA Unggulan Haf-Sa BPPT Genggong, focusing on how public relations practices integrate community actors (parents, alumni, community leaders) and digital media into a coherent branding strategy.

²⁵Suchman, "Managing Legitimacy."; Crossley, Elmagrhi, and Ntim, "Sustainability and Legitimacy Theory."

²⁶Nahapiet and Ghoshal, "Social Capital, Intellectual Capital."

²⁷L. E. Casper Fern and P. Thaichon, "Customer Pre-Participatory Social Media Drivers and Their Influence on Attitudinal Loyalty within the Retail Banking Industry: A Multi-Group Analysis Utilizing Social Exchange Theory," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 61 (2021): 102584, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102584>.

²⁸Ledingham and Bruning, "Relationship Management in Public Relations."; Botan and Taylor, "Public Relations: State of the Field."

Three questions guide the inquiry: (1) How do parents and alumni contribute to the school's branding through collaborative public relations activities? (2) What role do community leaders play in providing social legitimacy and extending the school's reputation? (3) How does the school use digital media as an interactive space for collaborative branding with stakeholders? The study's contribution is stated once and plainly: it provides empirical, process-level evidence from a faith-based K-12 setting for the collaborative and co-creational public relations models that Joshi, Wang, and Ran advance conceptually, and it specifies relational trust as the mechanism linking community engagement to branding.²⁹

Method

The study employs an intrinsic case-study design within a qualitative framework. Following Stake, an intrinsic case study is warranted when the case is of interest in its own right rather than as an instance chosen to represent a broader population.³⁰ Our concern is not school branding in general, but the specific dynamics of collaborative community relations at SMA Unggulan Haf-Sa BPPT Genggong, where a pesantren-based community structure shapes public relations practices in ways that differ from those in mainstream schools. We flag one tension explicitly: at points, the analysis moves toward conceptual abstraction (for example, in naming a coordination–amplification pattern). We treat any such abstraction as an analytic rather than a statistical generalization an invitation to examine whether the pattern holds and we deliberately restrict claims about “pesantren-based schools” as a class, reserving questions about generalization for the limitations section.

The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm that regards social reality as constructed through interaction among actors rather than as existing independently of them.³¹ This commitment was operationalized at four concrete points, not merely asserted. In *sampling*, informants were selected from multiple, potentially divergent positions in the school–community relationship so that the constructed image could be

²⁹Joshi, “Building ‘Foundational’ Linkages.”; Wang and Ran, “Network Governance and Collaborative Governance.”

³⁰R. E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995).; M. K. Alam, “A Systematic Qualitative Case Study: Questions, Data Collection, NVivo Analysis and Saturation,” *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 16, no. 1 (2021): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-09-2019-1825>.

³¹Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 105–117.

examined from several vantage points. In instrument design, the interview guide used open, meaning-eliciting prompts (how do you understand your role in the school’s image? rather than closed confirmatory items, inviting participants to articulate their own framings. In the *analysis*, coding treated statements as situated accounts rather than as reports of objective fact, and the first author kept a reflexive journal that recorded how her position as a participant-observer shaped her interpretation. In *handling divergence*, discrepant or less favorable accounts were retained and interpreted as meaningful constructions rather than smoothed away, on the view that competing meanings are themselves data.

SMA Unggulan Haf-Sa BPPT Genggong operates a dual-education model that combines the national academic curriculum with pesantren-based religious instruction; pupils come from several provinces and reside within the pesantren throughout their studies. The site was selected for three reasons: (a) it has an active public relations unit that coordinates communication with parents, alumni, and community leaders the institutional function under study; (b) its pesantren environment presents a distinctive stakeholder structure in which trust is mediated by religious authority, kinship, and intergenerational loyalty rather than by market position alone; and (c) it is increasingly adopting digital platforms (website, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) alongside traditional community engagement, allowing digital and relational strategies to be examined within a single case.

Informants were selected purposively on two criteria: direct involvement in the school’s public relations or branding activities, and the ability to provide first-hand accounts of the community’s role in shaping the school’s image. The procedure yielded 16 informants across six stakeholder categories (Table 1), spanning an institutional perspective (Head of School, public relations officers, teachers) and an external one (alumni, parents/guardians, community leaders). Parents were represented more heavily than other external groups because early observation identified them as the most frequent link between school and community; we treat this as a deliberate, and acknowledged, weighting rather than a neutral sample.

Table 1.
Research Informants

No.	Informant Category	n	Interview Code
1	Head of School	1	P
2	Public Relations Officer	2	PR

3	Teacher	3	TC
4	Alumni	4	AL
5	Parents/Guardians of Students	4	PG
6	Community Leaders	2	CL
Total		16	

Fieldwork was conducted between February and May 2026 using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. To avoid ambiguity, all interview extracts in this article are coded by category and year of collection (e.g., I_PG_2026); earlier draft codes dated 2024 have been corrected to reflect the 2026 fieldwork window.

Semi-structured interviews. Each informant was interviewed individually using a guide covering three domains: the informant’s relationship with the school and involvement in its public image; the activities, events, or platforms through which they contribute to or perceive that image; and their assessment of how school–community collaboration shapes institutional identity. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, lasted 35–50 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Participant observation. The first author served as a participant observer at community-facing school events during the fieldwork period, including a Year-10 parent orientation meeting (held in Hafshawaty Hall in March 2026), a graduation ceremony, a major Islamic holiday commemoration, and public gatherings attended by community leaders. Observation focused on the nature and frequency of school–community interaction, the visibility of public relations activity, and how informants enacted branding-related roles in situ. Field notes were written during and immediately after each event, allowing interview accounts to be read against observed practice.³²

Document analysis. Archival and digital documents were gathered from the public relations unit, including annual activity reports, social-media content (official Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok accounts), and the school website (smaunggulan.sch.id). These records formally document branding activity and allow institutional narratives to be compared with informants’ accounts. The three sources were triangulated so that interview statements could be read against observed behavior and documented activity.³³

³²J. Seim, “Participant Observation, Observant Participation, and Hybrid Ethnography,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 53, no. 1 (2024): 121–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124120986209>.

³³E. Denny and A. Weckesser, “How to Do Qualitative Research? Qualitative Research Methods,” *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 129, no. 7 (2022): 1166–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.17150>.

Transcripts, field notes, and document records were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's six-phase orientation.³⁴ Consistent with the constructivist stance, we treat themes not as objects lying in the data waiting to be discovered but as patterns of shared meaning actively constructed through the researcher's sustained, interpretive engagement. We clarify our procedure and its logic below rather than presenting theme development as a counting exercise.

In practice, familiarization involved repeated reading of the full corpus and the writing of analytic memos. Coding was interpretive and iterative: initial codes were not fixed labels applied for reliability, but provisional readings that were repeatedly revised as the first author's understanding of the pesantren context deepened. Candidate themes were developed by asking what central organizing concept could render a set of codes meaningful, tested against both the coded extracts and the full dataset, and rewritten several times; the reported themes are the product of these interpretive decisions, including choices to foreground relational and moral framings that recurred across otherwise different accounts. The numeric summary is provided only as an audit trail for that process, not as evidence that themes were derived through aggregation.

We also transparently address the close correspondence between the three themes and the three research questions. Because the interview guide was organized around the study's three foci, thematic development was in part deductively oriented by those foci rather than purely inductive; we therefore describe the analysis as theoretically informed and question-guided reflexive TA, and we do not claim that the themes "emerged" independently of the research design. Within each question-aligned area, however, the sub-themes and the interpretive claims particularly the identification of relational trust as a connecting thread were constructed from the data rather than stipulated in advance.

Throughout, the first author kept reflexive notes documenting coding decisions, alternative interpretations, and moments when the data unsettled her assumptions, in line with Braun and Clarke's emphasis on reflexivity as a marker of quality distinct from coding reliability.³⁵

³⁴V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Can I Use TA? Should I Use TA? Should I Not Use TA? Comparing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Other Pattern-Based Qualitative Analytic Approaches," *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 21, no. 1 (2021): 37–47, <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>.

³⁵V. Braun and V. Clarke, "A Critical Review of the Reporting of Reflexive Thematic Analysis in Health Promotion International," *Health Promotion International* 39, no. 3 (2024): daae049, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daae049>.

We pursued four quality practices, and we specify their epistemological status rather than presenting them as neutral guarantees of validity. *First*, we sought multiple perspectives by comparing accounts across the six informant categories, using convergence and importantly divergence between internal and external actors as analytic resources rather than as a test of a single truth. *Second*, we read interview data alongside field notes and documents (for instance, checking parents' claims about sharing school content against activity on the school's Instagram account), treating this less as verification of fact than as a way to build a richer, more contextually anchored interpretation. *Third*, rather than framing participant feedback as member checking which Braun and Clarke reject as a quality criterion for RTA because themes are the researcher's interpretive construction, not the participants,³⁶ we used *member reflection* in Smith and McGannon's sense: preliminary interpretations were shared with selected informants as a dialogic prompt for additional insight and elaboration, not as a means of validating or correcting the analysis.³⁷ *Fourth*, following the MIRACLE orientation to thick description, we report verbatim quotations, observational excerpts, and pesantren context in sufficient detail for readers to judge transferability to comparable settings.³⁸

Results

The analysis constructed three themes, each aligned with one research question: (1) collaborative public relations strategies with parents and alumni; (2) the role of community leaders in strengthening the school's reputation; and (3) digital media as a platform for collaborative branding. For each theme, we move beyond listing activities to ask how and why the observed patterns arise, and we then report divergent and less favorable accounts that complicate the largely positive picture.

Theme 1: Collaborative Public Relations with Parents and Alumni

Interviews with internal stakeholders (Head of School, public relations officers, teachers) and external stakeholders (parents, alumni) indicated that involvement extends beyond ceremonial participation. Participants described parents and alumni acting as

³⁶Braun and Clarke, "A Critical Review of the Reporting of Reflexive Thematic Analysis."

³⁷Brett Smith and Kerry R. McGannon, "Developing Rigor in Qualitative Research: Problems and Opportunities within Sport and Exercise Psychology," *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2018): 101–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357>.

³⁸A. Younas et al., "Proposing the 'MIRACLE' Narrative Framework for Providing Thick Description in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (2023): 16094069221147162, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221147162>.

active contributors to the school’s public image through three forms of engagement: practical support for events, informal promotion through personal networks, and financial contribution to institutional development. The head of the madrasah framed this as routine co-production rather than attendance:

“We always involve parents in every major school event. They do not merely attend as guests; they also contribute ideas and energy.” (I_P_2026)
A parent echoed this from an external vantage point:

“Whenever there is an event, we parents always try to help through catering, financial support, or simply by posting on social media so that more people know about this school.” (I_PG_2026)
Alumni framed their involvement in explicitly moral terms:

“As alumni, we feel responsible for upholding the school’s reputation by sharing its achievements and encouraging prospective students from our community to enroll here.” (I_AL_2026)
Observation at the Year-10 parent orientation corroborated these accounts: the meeting served not only to communicate academic policy but also as an occasion for leadership and parents to jointly articulate a shared educational commitment, with the Head of School using it to set expectations for ongoing school–family communication. Analytically, what makes this collaboration cohere is less the activities themselves than their relational grounding. In participants’ accounts, contribution followed from a sense of belonging and moral obligation, which is why it persisted across events rather than being mobilized transactionally for each one. Table 2 summarizes the forms of collaboration; the interpretive point is that each row represents an occasion to maintain a relationship, not merely to deliver a service.

Table 2.
Forms of Collaborative Public Relations with Parents and Alumni

Strategy	Implementation	Parent Contribution	Alumni Contribution
Partnership communication	Start-of-year parent orientation to align vision and coordinate activities	Convey aspirations; follow up on policy through discussion forums	Motivate new parents and pupils from personal experience
Participation in events	Graduations, competitions, social activities, and festivals are organized with the community.	Committee, logistics, and provision of event needs	Documentation, publicity, and mentoring
Resource and funding support	Fundraising, infrastructure donations, and moral support	Financial and material assistance	Equipment donations; event sponsorship

Digital-publishing synergy	Joint content publication across platforms	Share posts via groups and personal accounts	Post testimonials and achievements
Alumni-network strengthening	Haf-Sa Alumni Forum for external relations and social activity	Support children's engagement with alumni events	Act as ambassadors and resource persons
Character development	Family–alumni forums on pupils' values and discipline	Provide moral guidance; monitor development	Share formative experiences at Genggong

Across categories, a consistent pattern emerged: parents described their contribution primarily as practical support and digital dissemination, whereas alumni emphasized their role as intermediaries between the school and wider networks. Both groups articulated a personal commitment to the school's reputation that exceeded formal obligation an early indication that participation is anchored in relationship rather than incentive.

Theme 2: Community Leaders and Social Legitimacy

Interviews with community leaders and institutional actors indicated that local religious and community figures participate in branding in six ways, going beyond symbolic attendance to active moral and material support, public endorsement through religious forums, and mediation with external organizations. One leader stressed commitment over ceremony:

“We always support school activities, particularly those involving the local community. Our presence is not merely as guests; it is part of our commitment to advancing education in this area.” (I_CL_2026)

Another framed the school as communal property:

“This school plays a vital role in the local community, not only in educating our children but also as a hub for community activities. We feel a responsibility to uphold its good reputation.” (I_CL2_2026)

Observation confirmed that leaders attend graduations, Islamic holiday commemorations, and parent meetings, and that staff read this presence as social recognition that strengthens the school's credibility. The analytically important question is why such endorsement carries weight, and the data suggest a specific answer: leaders are valued not for institutional office they hold none but for perceived moral authority, so their backing transfers religious and social legitimacy that the institution cannot manufacture for itself. Table 3, therefore, reports not only the forms of involvement but their branding implication.

Table 3.
Community-Leader Roles and Their Branding Implications

Community-Leader Role	Concrete Form at Genggong	Implication for Branding
Attendance at official events	Presence at graduations, Islamic holiday commemorations, and parent meetings	Strong social recognition for the school's image
Moral and material support	Donations toward halls, transport for student activities	School is seen as community-backed
Promotion of a positive image	Recommendations at pengajian (informal community religious gatherings led by a religious figure) and village meetings	Reputation extends beyond the pesantren
Bridge to external institutions	Linking the school to the district government and religious organizations	Recognition within regional networks
Role modeling and legitimacy	Serving as exemplary figures who endorse programs	Brand reinforced by association with respected figures
Advocacy on public issues	Helping to defuse negative episodes (e.g., disciplinary cases)	Reputation remains stable under challenge

The data indicate that leaders extend branding reach from the local to the regional level through two mechanisms that participants repeatedly described: direct advocacy in community forums attended by audiences beyond the pesantren's vicinity and brokered institutional relationships among the school, the district government, and religious bodies. Crucially, these are channels the public relations unit cannot enter directly, which is precisely why the unit's work centers on cultivating the relationships that make such advocacy forthcoming.

Theme 3: Digital Media as Infrastructure for Participatory Branding

Analysis of interviews, social media content, and the website showed that the school uses four platforms website (smaunggulan.sch.id), Instagram (@smaunggulanhafsa), Facebook (SMAU Zaha Genggong), and TikTok (@smaunggulanhafsa) each with a distinct function. Teachers stressed immediacy:

"Social media allows us to immediately share pupils' achievements and school programs so that the public can follow our activities transparently." (I_TC_2026)
The public relations officer positioned the website as the verifiable record:

"We regularly update the website so that parents and alumni can access verified information about the school's programs and achievements at any time." (I_PR_2026)

A parent described community participation in dissemination:

"We often share the school's posts in the parents' group; this helps introduce the school to a wider community without formal promotion." (I_PG_2026)

Table 4 summarizes platform use and contribution. The analytic pattern is a division of labor: the website provides structured, verifiable depth, while social platforms provide speed and reach but the decisive move is that dissemination is not confined to institutional accounts. Parents and alumni re-share, comment on, and repost content through personal channels, so the school's reach expands through the community's networks rather than through institutional posting alone. In other words, the same relational commitment observed offline structures online participation.

Table 4.
Use of Digital Media and Its Contribution to Branding

Platform	Form of Use	Content Displayed	Contribution to Branding
Website (smaunggulan.sch.id)	Regular institutional updates	Timetables, policies, activity articles, achievements	Reliable, accessible official reference
Instagram (@smaunggulanhafsa)	Visual and creative promotion	Activity photos, short videos, reels, stories	More appealing; reaches younger audiences; raises engagement
Facebook (SMAU Zaha Genggong)	Reaching parents and senior alumni	Event albums, announcements, live broadcasts	Positive image spreads quickly among parents and locals
TikTok (@smaunggulanhafsa)	Short-form creative video	Challenges, behind-the-scenes clips, motivational content	More contemporary image; closer ties with young people

Divergent and Less Favorable Accounts

Because a uniformly positive picture would itself be a finding worth scrutinizing, we looked specifically for tension, ambivalence, and disagreement. Three qualifications surfaced. First, a minority of parents described collaboration as an *expectation* that could feel burdensome, particularly around fundraising and event logistics:

“Sometimes the requests come often enough that it feels like an obligation rather than a choice though we still help, because it is for the children.” (I_PG_2026)

Second, staff acknowledged that participation is uneven: the same committed parents and alumni recur, while others remain peripheral, so “community” branding in practice rests on an active core rather than the whole community. Third, informants recognized that community-driven dissemination is difficult to control: because content travels through personal accounts, the institution cannot guarantee message consistency, and a public relations officer noted the latent risk that informal channels could circulate inaccurate or off-message content during a controversy. These accounts do not overturn the three themes. Still, they qualify them: collaborative branding at Genggong is real yet

effortful, concentrated in an engaged minority, and accompanied by a loss of message control that the institution accepts as the price of reach.

Discussion

The findings address three questions about how collaborative public relations management operates as a community-based branding mechanism at SMA Unggulan Haf-Sa BPPT Genggong. This section interprets each theme against the literature distinguishing what is confirmed, extended, and complicated before consolidating the account into an explicit conceptual model and stating the study's contributions. Throughout, we are careful to keep interpretive claims proportionate to the evidence: where the data support only participants' descriptions, we say so.

Parents and Alumni: From Audience to Co-Producers

The first question concerned parents' and alumni's contributions. Participants described themselves not as recipients of school messaging but as co-producers of institutional value through practical support, informal promotion, and financial investment. This is consistent with Casper Ferm and Thaichon's account of participatory social exchange, in which sustained reciprocity shifts stakeholders from audiences to contributors,³⁹ and with Zizka and colleagues' notion of community members as "reputation agents" who carry institutional values outward.⁴⁰ It also gives empirical substance, in a K-12 faith-based setting, to the relational and co-creational tradition in public relations Ledingham and Bruning's relationship-management model and Botan and Taylor's co-creational perspective by showing publics functioning as partners in meaning-making rather than targets of persuasion.⁴¹

The study extends this work by specifying the mechanism of the shift. Here, the move from audience to promoter was described as driven less by satisfaction with service quality the pathway assumed in market-oriented models such as those of Manzoor and colleagues⁴² than by relational trust built through sustained interaction, shared educational responsibility, and religiously grounded moral obligation. We are careful here

³⁹Casper Ferm and Thaichon, "Customer Pre-Participatory Social Media Drivers."

⁴⁰L. Zizka, D. M. McGunagle, and P. J. Clark, "Sustainability in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Programs: Authentic Engagement through a Community-Based Approach," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 279 (2021): 123715, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.123715>.

⁴¹Ledingham and Bruning, "Relationship Management in Public Relations."; Botan and Taylor, "Public Relations: State of the Field."

⁴²Manzoor, Ho, and Al Mahmud, "Revisiting the 'University Image Model.'"

about the status of this claim. Because the data are self-reports of motivation, they cannot by themselves establish trust as a causal mechanism; a skeptic could read “moral obligation” as a post hoc rationalization. We therefore treat relational trust in Rousseau and colleagues’ sense of a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations⁴³ as warranted not by motivational talk alone but by its triangulated behavioural correlates: participation that recurs across multiple events over time, that is directed at reputational defence in settings where no institutional reward is available (for example, alumni recruiting in their home communities), and that is corroborated by observation and platform records rather than resting on interview claims. On that combined basis, we advance relational trust as the most plausible organizing interpretation, while acknowledging that it is an interpretive inference rather than a measured effect.

Arnado and colleagues offer a useful comparison: dense social ties generated “enforceable trust” that stabilized a Catholic school’s enrolment through the pandemic.⁴⁴ Our case confirms the closure mechanism but adds an agentic qualification. While Arnado and colleagues treat closure as a structural property of the network, our data suggest that, at Genggong, closure is actively *maintained* by the public relations unit, which stages occasions (such as the Year-10 orientation) designed to renew relational bonds. The unit is thus a facilitator of closure, not merely its beneficiary an emphasis consistent with a social-capital reading in which relational resources must be deliberately cultivated to be mobilized.⁴⁵

Community Leaders: Legitimacy from Outside the Institution

The second question concerned community leaders. Their six forms of engagement align with social-capital accounts of educational leadership Berhanu on principals building social capital through community engagement,⁴⁶ Trisnantari and colleagues on strategic public relations mobilizing community-leader support in Indonesian boarding

⁴³Denise M. Rousseau et al., “Not So Different After All: A Cross-Discipline View of Trust,” *Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 3 (1998): 393–404, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1998.926617>.

⁴⁴Arnado et al., “Trust in Pandemic-Induced Online Learning.”

⁴⁵Nahapiet and Ghoshal, “Social Capital, Intellectual Capital.”

⁴⁶Kelemu Zelalem Berhanu, “Primary School Principals’ Strategies to Develop the Social Capital of Students of East Gojjam Province, Ethiopia,” *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 10 (2024): 100946, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100946>.

schools,⁴⁷ and Muryali and colleagues on committee and local-leader support raising public engagement.⁴⁸ Our contribution is to specify how such support translates into branding: leaders do not merely lend their names but actively circulate positive narratives through pengajian and village meetings that the public relations unit cannot reach directly. This is consistent with Schlegelmilch's argument that legitimacy strengthens when endorsement originates outside the organization,⁴⁹ and with legitimacy theory's premise that acceptance follows alignment with the values of a relevant audience.⁵⁰

A qualification distinguishes this case from market-oriented Islamic-branding research, such as Mahmud and colleagues' and Nugraha and colleagues', where branding effectiveness is tied to institutionally controlled factors flagship programs, promotion, and infrastructure.⁵¹ Our data suggest that where religious authorities mediate trust, branding also depends on actors and forums beyond the institution's formal boundaries, and that the effectiveness of external endorsement rests on the endorser's perceived moral authority rather than on social status alone. The public relations contribution, correspondingly, is to sustain relationships with such figures and create openings for their involvement rather than to control the branding message.

Digital Media: A Coordination–Amplification Pattern

The third question concerned digital media. The findings show a two-tier strategy social platforms for speed, appeal, and interactivity; the website for structured, verifiable information consistent with Luque-Martínez and colleagues on e-WOM and information quality and with Zainul and colleagues on complementary platform use in Indonesian madrasahs.⁵² The study extends by showing that community participation in dissemination is not a by-product of platform design but is actively encouraged by the

⁴⁷H. E. Trisnantari, M. Gufron, and P. R. Ningsih, "Strategic Public Relations to Build Public Trust in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Case Study in Indonesia," *Tarbawi: Jurnal Keilmuan Manajemen Pendidikan* 10, no. 02 (2024): 325–36.

⁴⁸M. Muryali et al., "Publicity as a Policy Instrument: Analyzing Communication Strategies and Public Perception of Aceh's Teacher Capacity Enhancement Policy," *Electronic Journal of Education, Social Economics and Technology* 6, no. 2 (2025): 683.

⁴⁹B. B. Schlegelmilch, "Enhancing Legitimacy: A Pathway to Strategy Renewal of Business Schools," *Journal of Marketing Education* 47, no. 1 (2025): 6–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02734753241265278>.

⁵⁰Suchman, "Managing Legitimacy."

⁵¹Mahmud et al., "Educational Excellence and Strategic Promotion."; Nugraha, Bakti, and Zubair, "The Branding and Reputation of Islamic Education."

⁵²Luque-Martínez, Faraoni, and Doña-Toledo, "Reflecting University Image."; Zainul et al., "Optimizing Social Media and School Websites."

public relations unit, which treats parents and alumni as partners in distribution rather than as an audience.

Prabayanti and colleagues' audit of a university's fragmented Instagram communication offers a contrast.⁵³ At Genggong, the public relations unit serves as a single point of coordination for content, while the community amplifies it through personal channels. We name this a *coordination–amplification* pattern: a small institutional team produces coherent content and a larger community network distributes it. Del Soldato and Massari argue that digital branding is strengthened when communities co-produce and distribute content rather than merely consume it.⁵⁴ Our case confirms the principle but adds a contextual specification in the pesantren, amplification is driven not by platform incentives (likes, reach) but by the same relational and moral commitments that structure offline engagement. As the divergent accounts show, this reach is purchased at the cost of message control, a trade-off the institution knowingly accepts.

A Conceptual Model and Its Propositions

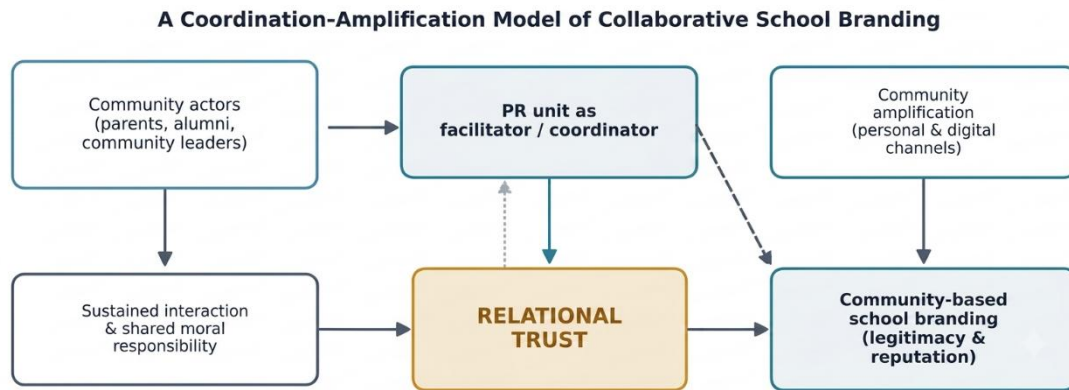
To make the contribution explicit rather than asserted, we consolidate the three themes into a testable model (Figure 1). The model treats relational trust as the pivot linking community engagement to branding, and casts the public relations unit as a facilitator that both cultivates that trust and coordinates its amplification. We state it as three propositions to invite empirical testing beyond this single site:

P1. Sustained, morally framed interaction among a school, parents, alumni, and community leaders builds relational trust a willingness to act on the school's behalf based on positive expectations. P2. Relational trust, more than satisfaction with service quality, converts community engagement into branding contributions (practical support, external endorsement, and voluntary content dissemination). P3. Where a public relations unit acts as facilitator cultivating relationships and coordinating a single content stream that the community amplifies community-based branding gains reach and legitimacy, at the cost of reduced message control.

Figure 1.
A coordination–amplification model of collaborative school branding, with relational trust as the linking mechanism

⁵³Prabayanti, Mustaji, and Roesminingsih, "Auditing Social Media Communication."

⁵⁴E. Del Soldato and S. Massari, "Creativity and Digital Strategies to Support Food Cultural Heritage in Mediterranean Rural Areas," *EuroMed Journal of Business* 19, no. 1 (2024): 113–37, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EMJB-05-2023-0152>.



The Pesantren as a Distinctive Branding Environment

Across the three themes, a consistent contrast distinguishes Genggong from mainstream branding models. Where market-oriented models build an image through controlled messaging, service quality management, and positioning aimed at attracting “customers,” branding here emerges as a by-product of ongoing relationships rooted in religious values and shared moral commitment. Three features shape this: the moral authority of *kiai*, which supplies legitimacy that promotion cannot replicate; a communal ethic that frames the school as a shared moral project rather than a service; and an intergenerational structure in which alums sustain long-term ties, generating relational continuity that maintains the brand without continuous promotional investment. This is one plausible reading of a single case, not a claim about pesantren schools in general; whether the pattern recurs elsewhere is an empirical question we pose rather than settle.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

We state the theoretical contribution in proportionate terms. It is primarily *confirmatory and elaborative* rather than announcing a wholly new theory: the study supplies process-level empirical grounding, from a faith-based K-12 setting, for collaborative and co-creational public relations models argued conceptually by Joshi and by Wang and Ran, and, earlier, by the relationship-management and co-creational traditions.⁵⁵ Its more specific move is to identify relational trust as the mechanism linking community engagement to branding, and to render that mechanism as an explicit, testable model (Figure 1). Prior Islamic-branding research has identified relevant factors *kiai* leadership, flagship programs, promotion but has treated them as inputs without

⁵⁵Joshi, “Building ‘Foundational’ Linkages.”; Wang and Ran, “Network Governance and Collaborative Governance.”; Ledingham and Bruning, “Relationship Management in Public Relations.”; Botan and Taylor, “Public Relations: State of the Field.”

specifying the linking process; our contribution is to propose and operationalize, for future testing, the mechanisms that connect those inputs to public perception.

The practical implications are tied directly to specific findings rather than offered as generic advice. Because contribution here followed from relationship rather than campaign, public relations units in similar settings might weight staff time toward relationship maintenance orientation events, alumni-forum upkeep, and leader liaison over message production; this follows from Theme 1's finding that the orientation meeting, not a promotional artifact, was the pivotal branding occasion. Because reach at Genggong came from community re-sharing rather than institutional posting (Theme 3), schools might invest in equipping parents and alums with shareable content instead of expanding their own accounts. And because leaders' endorsement worked through pengajian and village meetings, the unit could not enter (Theme 2), engagement is better routed through leaders' existing social roles than through formal institutional events. The divergent accounts add a fourth, cautionary implication specific to this model. Since amplification sacrifices message control and rests on an active minority, units should pair it with a light-touch protocol to correct inaccurate community content and with deliberate efforts to broaden participation beyond the committed core.

Limitations and Further Research

Four limitations bound these claims. *First*, this is a single institution within a specific pesantren community; its dynamics may reflect the size and reputation of the parent institution and the surrounding community, and cannot be generalized statistically to other faith-based schools. A multi-site comparison would help separate context-specific features from transferable ones. *Second*, the study relies on self-reports to connect engagement to branding outcomes; it does not independently measure effects on perception, enrolment, or reputation. Combining qualitative process tracing with quantitative outcome measures would strengthen inference and help test the propositions in Figure 1. *Third*, although we deliberately sought divergent accounts, the design cannot fully quantify the prevalence of burden, uneven participation, or message-control failures; research targeting the risks and failure modes of community-driven branding would complete the picture. *Fourth*, participatory digital branding presupposes digital literacy and access that vary across communities; how such variation affects the model's feasibility remains an open question.

Conclusion

This study examined how collaborative public relations management shapes branding at SMA Unggulan Haf-Sa BPPT Genggong, a pesantren-based secondary school in East Java. Across interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, branding emerged not from institutionally controlled messaging but from sustained relationships among parents/guardians, alumni, kiai, and other community figures. Parents/guardians and alumni acted as co-producers of institutional identity through practical support, informal promotion, and financial contribution framed as moral obligation; kiai and local community leaders supplied social legitimacy grounded in perceived moral authority rather than institutional office; and digital media functioned as infrastructure through which the school's Public Relations Unit (Humas) coordinated content that community networks amplified. Divergent accounts qualified this picture: collaboration was effortful, concentrated in an active minority, and accompanied by reduced message control.

Interpreted through legitimacy, social capital, and social exchange theories, these findings position relational trust, defined as stakeholders' willingness to act on the school's behalf based on positive expectations grounded in sustained interaction and shared moral commitment, as the mechanism linking community engagement to branding. The study grounds collaborative and co-creational public relations arguments empirically in a pesantren-based secondary setting and specifies a testable coordination–amplification model in which the Public Relations Unit facilitates rather than controls collective identity. Practically, public relations units in analytically similar settings may benefit from prioritizing relationship maintenance over message production while developing protocols to manage the trade-off between community reach and message control.

As an instrumental case study with intrinsic elements, these conclusions are interpretive and bound to a single site. Multi-site comparative research combining process tracing with outcome measurement, including enrolment trends, stakeholder perception surveys, and systematic content analysis of amplified digital material, would test the proposed model across pesantren-based schools and other Islamic educational contexts. Attention to failure modes, generational variation in alumni engagement, and the digital

literacy conditions under which participatory branding operates would further specify the model's boundary conditions.

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