

Strategic Admission Management for Madrasah Competitiveness: Integrating Service Quality and School Branding

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Abstract

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This study examines the optimisation strategies of New Student Admission (NSA) management at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo through a service excellence and school branding approach. In an increasingly competitive educational landscape, institutions are required not only to provide quality learning but also to build a strong public image. This research employed a qualitative case study conducted from February to June 2025, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings indicate that the school implements service strategies such as one-stop services, digital-based information systems, and responsive communication, while branding strategies are carried out through social media promotion, showcasing institutional excellence via events, and publishing student achievements. The integration of these strategies effectively enhances public trust and expands the reach of prospective students both locally and beyond. Supporting factors include strong collaboration between management and teachers, as well as continuous service innovation. This study contributes to Islamic Education Management by offering a strategic model that integrates service quality and branding to strengthen institutional competitiveness. However, the study is limited to a single institutional context. Future research is recommended to include multiple institutions, apply quantitative methods, and conduct longitudinal studies, as well as explore digital leadership and educational innovation to better understand the sustainability of admission strategies in the digital era.

Kata Kunci:

Manajemen Strategis, Penerimaan Peserta Didik Baru, Kualitas Pelayanan, Branding Sekolah, Keunggulan Kompetitif

Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti strategi optimasi manajemen Penerimaan Siswa Baru (PSB) di MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo melalui pendekatan keunggulan layanan dan branding sekolah. Dalam lanskap pendidikan yang semakin kompetitif, lembaga pendidikan dituntut tidak hanya untuk menyediakan pembelajaran berkualitas, tetapi juga untuk membangun citra publik yang kuat. Penelitian ini menggunakan studi kasus kualitatif yang dilakukan dari Februari hingga Juni 2025, dengan data yang dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa sekolah menerapkan strategi layanan seperti layanan satu atap, sistem informasi berbasis digital, dan komunikasi responsif, sementara strategi branding dilakukan melalui promosi media sosial, menampilkan keunggulan institusional melalui acara, dan mempublikasikan prestasi siswa. Integrasi strategi-strategi ini secara efektif meningkatkan kepercayaan publik dan memperluas jangkauan calon siswa baik secara lokal maupun internasional. Faktor pendukungnya meliputi kolaborasi yang kuat antara manajemen dan guru serta inovasi layanan yang berkelanjutan. Studi ini berkontribusi pada Manajemen Pendidikan Islam dengan menawarkan model strategis yang mengintegrasikan kualitas layanan dan branding untuk memperkuat daya saing institusional.

Namun, studi ini terbatas pada konteks institusi tunggal. Penelitian selanjutnya disarankan untuk melibatkan berbagai institusi, menerapkan metode kuantitatif, melakukan studi longitudinal, serta mengeksplorasi kepemimpinan digital dan inovasi pendidikan untuk lebih memahami keberlanjutan strategi penerimaan di era digital.

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian education sector is currently experiencing a period of substantial transformation, characterised by intensified competition among educational institutions. This phenomenon has been observed across all levels of education, from early childhood education to higher education, in various regions (Herdianto et al., 2022). The public now has greater access to information, rendering them more discerning when selecting the most suitable educational institutions for their children. Thus, according to (Hidayah et al., 2024) They state that this condition necessitates that educational institutions formulate bespoke strategies to ensure their continued competitiveness. In the contemporary educational landscape, institutions that fail to adapt to these changes risk becoming marginalised in the competitive pursuit of prospective students.

Muhammadiyah schools are expected not only to preserve their Islamic and Muhammadiyah identities but also to continuously innovate in response to changing societal expectations. According to (Azkiyah et al., 2020; Siti Nur Anissa et al., 2024) Public expectations toward Muhammadiyah educational institutions have evolved beyond purely religious dimensions, emphasising the integration of Islamic values with academic excellence and professional management (Sahniarti, Ahmad, Z., & Zainal, 2024). In response to this context, New Student Admissions (NSA) management at Islamic Muhammadiyah Secondary School of Sukoharjo can no longer rely solely on religious identity as its primary appeal but must adopt a strategic and professional approach. This study was conducted, making it a relevant case for examining strategic approaches to new student admissions management within a competitive educational environment (Suja'i, 2016).

In addition, NSA represents a practical implementation of strategic management in educational institutions, involving the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of decisions based on internal and external analyses to achieve long-term institutional goals (BREAZ & JARADAT, 2024). This process requires systematic planning and service excellence, particularly through clear information, simple procedures, and responsive interactions with prospective students and parents (Sukmiridiyanto et al., 2024). To remain competitive and relevant, schools need comprehensive branding strategies that combine Islamic values with academic excellence, supported by stakeholder engagement and effective educational management practices (Basit et al., 2024) (Murdianto, 2024). Therefore, integrating service quality and strategic branding becomes essential for strengthening institutional reputation, meeting societal expectations, and sustaining competitive advantage (A. K. Ahmed & Kising'u, 2019) .

Previous research has highlighted the importance of educational marketing strategies and service quality in attracting students. (Fakhrudin et al., 2024) demonstrated that strong school branding exerts a significant influence on prospective students' interest in enrollment by shaping perceptions and enhancing attractiveness through various marketing strategies (Ulfah, 2021). Similarly, in the context of Islamic education, Islamic education marketing contributes positively to student recruitment and fosters greater public trust in schools. (Sri Haryanti et al., 2023). Conversely, many private educational institutions struggle with implementing structured admissions strategies that prioritise service quality, which is essential for their competitiveness and

sustainability. (Van Antwerpen & Van Schalkwyk, 2024). Collectively, these findings indicate that service-oriented approaches and a well-developed institutional image are pivotal determinants of success in managing New Student Admissions.

This study extends existing literature by examining MT Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo as a case of integrating service-oriented and branding-based strategies in New Student Admissions (NSA) management (Wider et al., 2024). Its novelty lies in proposing an integrative approach that combines service excellence and strategic branding within madrasah-based admission management, an area that previous studies have generally explored separately and rarely within structured NSA systems in Islamic educational institutions (Chotimah et al., 2024). By addressing this gap, the study offers both a contextualised case and a practical framework that may be adapted by madrasahs operating under similar conditions, while contributing to the broader discourse on educational management and institutional competitiveness (Yana et al., 2024).

The urgency of this research is reflected in fluctuating enrollment trends among private madrasahs, which directly affect institutional sustainability. (Suharyadi, 2022) notes that private madrasahs face declining popularity due to competition from modern educational institutions and persistent negative perceptions of religious schools, while enrollment instability may result in financial and resource limitations (Aileen Gani Padilla, 2024). Therefore, NSA should be understood not merely as an administrative process but as a strategic indicator of institutional quality, public engagement, and branding effectiveness. (Van Schalkwyk & Steenkamp, 2019) This study specifically aims to conduct an in-depth examination of the implementation of strategic management in optimising NSA through the integration of excellent service and school branding at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo, while also assessing its impact on community attractiveness and trust, as well as the challenges encountered in the process.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation of strategic management in New Student Admissions (NSA), particularly the integration of service quality and school branding at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo, Central Java, Indonesia. A case study approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex organisational practices within real-life contexts and facilitates exploration of values, perceptions, and challenges underlying institutional strategies (Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022) (Stake & Visse, 2023) (ANNAMALAH, 2024). Conducted from February to June 2025, this study focused on MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing as a private Islamic secondary school situated within a competitive educational environment where public and private institutions compete to attract students. (Friedman et al., 2022).

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Interviews were conducted with the Principal, Deputy Principal for Curriculum, Deputy Principal for Student Affairs, who also served on the NSA Committee, and eight parents to explore strategic admission practices, service quality perceptions, and branding implementation (Klingebiel et al., 2024). Observation focused on the execution of NSA activities during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, before the commencement of the 2025/2026 admission cycle, including registration procedures, administrative verification, entrance testing, and communication with prospective students and parents. Additional evidence was obtained through

document analysis of admission brochures, annual school reports, promotional media, and strategic planning documents (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach in which interview transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to strategic management, service quality, and branding practices before being organised into broader interpretative categories (Sithole, 2025). To enhance the trustworthiness and rigour of the findings, this study employed triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing, as these strategies are recognised as essential mechanisms for validating qualitative interpretations and ensuring research credibility. (S. K. Ahmed, 2024). Triangulation was achieved by integrating interview, observation, and documentary evidence, while member checking involved confirming interpretations with selected participants and peer debriefing was conducted through discussions with fellow researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Educational Service Management Strategy for New Student Admission

Observations conducted during the New Student Admissions (NSA) process at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo indicated that the school implemented a diversified educational service management strategy to accommodate the varying needs and preferences of prospective students and their families. This strategy was reflected in the provision of two educational pathways, namely the boarding school system and the non-boarding school system, both of which were introduced as integral components of the school's admission offerings.

During the observation period, information regarding these two service options was consistently communicated through admission activities and interactions with prospective students and parents. The availability of both pathways appeared to represent the school's effort to enhance service accessibility while strengthening its institutional attractiveness in a competitive educational environment. The Principal's statement above, it reveals that the implementation of educational service units is intentionally designed to address the heterogeneous needs of students and parents. The school provides two main service units: boarding and non-boarding.

The boarding system is positioned to offer students a more structured environment with intensive supervision and character development. Meanwhile, the non-boarding unit is subdivided into regular classes and special programs, enabling parents to select a pathway that best corresponds to their child's academic capacity and personal aspirations. The special program specifically targets students who require enrichment or additional competencies beyond the regular curriculum. Through this strategic diversification of services, the school strengthens parental trust, enhances student satisfaction, and maintains its competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic educational landscape.

I prefer to send my child to a boarding school because we want our child to receive a more intensive religious education, not only during formal school hours but also in everyday life at the boarding school. This system gives us peace of mind because our child is better supervised spiritually and disciplined. (Interview with Mr Azka, parent of an 8th-grade student at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo).
This variety allows parents and students to choose the most suitable learning pathway, fostering flexibility, building trust, and enabling the school to meet diverse expectations in a competitive educational environment. (Interview with the Principal of MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo, Muhammad Isa Malik Ibrahim).

Furthermore, the dual-unit model demonstrates the madrasa's efforts to address the diverse needs of the community. Interviews with several parents who send their children there reveal that some desired an education that emphasises religious aspects through a boarding system, while others prefer a regular system with flexible, specialised programs. The interview reveals that the differences in choice between boarding and non-boarding units are based on parents' needs and expectations regarding the balance between religious education, academics, and home care. Most parents felt that these two educational service units provided an alternative that suited the characteristics and needs of each family.

Based on the interview above, it emphasises that the boarding service strategy has been directed toward the optimisation of facilities and infrastructure, the cultivation of students' moral values, and the establishment of a well-structured daily schedule. These elements are considered essential in fostering a supportive learning environment that integrates academic achievement with character building. The structured schedule is specifically designed to balance students' academic responsibilities with religious and personal development, ensuring holistic growth. Such an approach not only creates comfort and stability for the students but also enhances parental trust in the institution. Consequently, the strategic management of boarding services contributes to improving educational quality, strengthening stakeholder confidence, and sustaining the school's competitive advantage.

Moreover, the service strategy provided by the madrasah, particularly in the boarding school unit, is a significant competitive advantage. Interviews with parents reveal that the clean and representative dormitory facilities, structured daily student programs, strict yet humane disciplinary supervision, and a deep spiritual approach provide parents with a sense of security in entrusting their children to the school. The professional, transparent, and Islamic-based management of the boarding school also strengthens the madrasah's image as an ideal place to develop students' character and noble morals. One parent whose child lives in the dormitory states:

We feel very secure entrusting our children here because the dormitory facilities are clean, tidy, and very representative. The students' daily program is also well-organised, from learning activities and worship to character development. (Interview with Mr. Azka, parent of an 8th grade student at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo).
The spiritual approach is profound, not just a formality. This makes us confident that this boarding school is not just a place of learning, but also a place to shape the morals and character of children. (Interview with Mr Muhaimin, parent of a 9th-grade student at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo).

From the interviews, it can be concluded that parents' trust in the Islamic boarding school is based not only on the physical facilities, but also on the quality of the program, humanistic discipline, and professional management based on Islamic values. This strengthens the image of the madrasah as an educational institution capable of developing the character and noble morals of its students holistically. Another educational service management strategy is the flagship program offered by the school for its students. This program is linked to Islam and the digital era, and is expected to attract new students to pursue secondary education at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo. The following is a direct interview with the principal.

Furthermore, the educational service management strategy is also analysed based on new student admission documents. Data from the previous academic year, 2024/2025, show that the number of students at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing had reached 722 students, divided into 25

study groups. Furthermore, another factor that strengthens MT Muhammadiyah Blimbing's appeal is student achievement at both the district and provincial levels. In two recent events, the Ahmad Dahlan Olympiad (OlympicAD) and the 2025 Sports and Arts Week (PORSENI), students at this madrasah achieved impressive results. At the 5th OlympicAD of Sukoharjo Regency level, MT's Muhammadiyah Blimbing won 7 medals, while at the 2025 PORSENI event, the madrasah won a total of nine medals: six gold, one silver, and two bronze.

Table 1. Educational Service Management Strategy for New Student Admission

Aspect	Strategy	Implementation	Evidence	Competitiveness
Educational Service Unit	Service differentiation	Offering Boarding and Non-Boarding (regular & special classes)	Availability of multiple program tracks	Meets diverse needs, increases attractiveness to wider market segments
Student Enrollment	Capacity expansion strategy	Managing 722 students across 25 classes	Enrollment exceeds ideal capacity	Indicates high demand and strengthens competitive position
Boarding School Service	Service excellence	Infrastructure optimisation, character building, structured daily schedule	Organised boarding system and facilities	Builds parental trust and enhances institutional reputation
Flagship Programs	Branding strategy	Qur'an memorisation, entrepreneurship, and ICT programs	Distinctive academic and non-academic programs	Differentiates madrasah and attracts target-oriented applicants
Student Achievements	Image reinforcement	Participation in Olympiads and PORSENI events	Documented academic and non-academic achievements	Strengthens school branding and significantly boosts student admissions

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Based on Table 1 above, the school implements strategic service units, including boarding and non-boarding options, supported by flagship programs such as Qur'an memorisation, entrepreneurship, and ICT. Student enrollment in 2024/2025 reached 722 across 25 classes, indicating strong public interest but also the need for classroom expansion. Optimised facilities, structured boarding services, and student achievements further enhance the school's brand image and strengthen its competitiveness in student admission.

Branding and Promotion Strategies for New Student Admissions

The New Student Admissions (NSA) process at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo, shows that promotional and branding activities are integrated into the school's strategy to strengthen its competitive position. These efforts extend beyond administrative admission procedures and are designed to increase institutional visibility and attract prospective students and parents. Furthermore, social media platforms are actively utilised as part of the school's branding approach to communicate educational programs, institutional values, and school activities. The consistent use of digital promotion reflected the school's strategic effort to build public engagement and enhance its image within the increasingly competitive educational landscape.

The interview with the Vice Principal for Student Affairs, who also serves as a committee member for student admission, highlights the strategic role of social media in strengthening the

school's branding and promotional activities. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are actively utilised to disseminate information, share parents' testimonials, and showcase student achievements. This digital engagement is not only effective in expanding the school's visibility beyond Sukoharjo but also in reinforcing its positive image as a modern Islamic educational institution. By consistently managing its digital presence, the school can build stronger connections with the community, enhance its reputation, and attract a wider pool of prospective students.

Based on the interview above, it reveals that word-of-mouth promotion plays a significant role in strengthening the school's branding strategy. This approach is implemented through muballigh from the Muhammadiyah Communication Council (MCC), many of whom also serve as teachers at the madrasah. By conveying information in community forums, these figures provide credibility and trustworthiness that are not easily achieved through digital channels. Word-of-mouth promotion is considered highly effective because it generates organic and personal engagement, ensuring that the school's message resonates more deeply with the community. As a result, this strategy not only enhances public trust but also contributes to the sustainability of student recruitment.

"In managing student admission, we actively use social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok as part of our branding strategy. Through these platforms, we regularly share information, testimonials from parents and students, as well as updates on student achievements. (Interview with the Deputy Head of Student Affairs, Khoiri Ex Indarto).

"As the principal, I believe that organising educational activities such as open houses, seminars, and both academic and non-academic competitions for Secondary School students is an effective strategy to introduce our institution. (Interview with the Principal, Muhammad Isa Malik Ibrahim).

From an academic perspective, this statement illustrates how alumni and community engagement contribute to school branding and trust-building. Alumni serve as living proof of institutional success, providing authentic narratives that strengthen credibility and influence parental decisions. Furthermore, collaboration with community groups extends the school's visibility, fostering relational capital that supports long-term sustainability. Such strategies align with the concept of social capital in educational management, where trust, networks, and shared values become competitive advantages in student admission.

The result of the interview and documentation above indicates that the urgency of branding and promotion in NSA lies in the need to strengthen the school's identity and differentiate it in a highly competitive educational environment. In line with these findings, direct testimony from a parent of a student at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo regarding branding and promotion strategies is stated as follows:

"We first learned about the school through its social media promotions and community activities, which gave us a clear picture of its programs and values. Seeing alumni testimonials and student achievements convinced us that this school is the right place for our child's education." (Interview with Mr Muhaimin, parent of a 9th-grade student).

Regarding the findings above, they are briefly presented in the following table regarding the Branding and Promotion Strategy for the NSA process implemented with the aim of competitive advantage at MTs Muhammadiyah Sukoharjo and its implications.

Table 2. Strategy of Branding and Promotion and Their Implication

Aspect	Strategies	Implication
Social media as Branding	Using Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to disseminate information, testimonials, and achievements.	Increasing the madrasa's digital reach and image, extending beyond Sukoharjo.
Promotion of Word of Mouth (WOM)	Through the preachers of the Muhammadiyah Communication Council, who are also teachers at madrasas, this was presented in community forums.	Increasing public trust, organic and personal promotion.
Educational and Outreach Activities	Holding open houses, educational seminars, and academic and non-academic competitions for Secondary School students.	Building emotional bonds, strengthening a positive image, and fostering interest among prospective students.
Collaboration with Alumni and the Community	Involving successful alumni in promotions, testimonials, and local community networking.	Expanding networks and enhancing the school's reputation through credible role models.

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Table 2 above highlights the branding and promotion strategies implemented in student admission, including the use of social media, word of mouth, educational and social activities, and alumni collaboration. These strategies effectively extend the school's digital reach, foster community trust, and build emotional connections with prospective students. As a result, the institution strengthens its reputation, enhances competitiveness, and attracts wider interest from both local and external communities.

Challenges in Implementing Strategic Management in the New Student Admissions Program

In addition to examining the implementation of strategic management in the New Student Admissions (NSA) process, observations also identified several challenges affecting its execution at MT's Muhammadiyah Blimbing, Sukoharjo. These challenges are primarily related to limitations in physical infrastructure, particularly classroom capacity and the availability of supporting facilities to accommodate increasing institutional demands. During the observation period, such constraints appeared to influence the school's efforts to optimise admission management and maintain service quality. The findings suggest that, despite strategic initiatives to strengthen institutional competitiveness, the availability of adequate facilities remains an important factor in supporting the effective implementation of NSA management.

From the statement above, the Deputy Principal of Curriculum emphasises that one of the main challenges faced by the institution is the imbalance between the increasing number of students and the limited classroom capacity. He further highlighted the urgent need to expand supporting facilities, such as laboratories, libraries, and sports facilities, to maintain the quality of learning. According to him, investment in physical infrastructure is essential to ensure that the institution can continue to accommodate the growing demand while providing an optimal educational environment.

Furthermore, according to the Deputy Principal of Student Affairs at MT's Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo, another challenge faced in implementing strategic management for the school's NSA activities is the need to strengthen the digital system for NSA administration and services. The following is a direct interview with the person concerned:

“As the number of students continues to grow, one of our biggest challenges is the limited classroom space that no longer matches student demand. We also face the urgent need to expand supporting facilities such as laboratories, libraries, and sports facilities to provide a well-rounded learning environment. (Interview with the Deputy Principal of Curriculum, Nur Hakimah Siwi Handayani).

“In the new student admissions process, the main challenge we face is the need to strengthen our digital systems, both in administration and service. Today's society demands fast, transparent, and accessible services. Therefore, we are striving to develop an integrated digital system to make the entire new student admissions process more efficient, transparent, and able to increase user satisfaction.” (Interview with the Deputy Head of Student Affairs, Khoiri Ex Indarto).

An interview with the Deputy Head of Student Affairs at MT's Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo reveals that one of the main challenges in implementing strategic management of NSA is the need to strengthen digital systems in administration and services. Public demands for fast, efficient, and transparent services are driving the school to implement more integrated digital innovations. The school emphasises that developing a comprehensive digital system is a crucial step in increasing the efficiency of the new student admissions process while strengthening public trust. This effort is also expected to increase user satisfaction and strengthen the school's image amidst increasingly fierce competition among educational institutions.

Furthermore, regarding this challenge, the Principal adds that the limited quality and quantity of human resources (HR) at MT's Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo is a barrier to the NSA. A direct interview with him revealed the following:

“One of the main challenges we face is the limited quality and quantity of human resources, both teachers and educational staff. In the context of NSA implementation and increasingly competitive education services, improving human resource capacity is crucial. (Interview with the Principal, Muhammad Isa Malik Ibrahim).

An interview with the Principal of MT's Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo reveals that limited human resources (HR) quality and quantity remain a major challenge in implementing strategic management of NSA and educational services. This situation demands strengthening the capacity of teachers and education personnel through ongoing training, more selective and strategic recruitment, and the implementation of modern HR management.

The Principal emphasised that improving HR competency and professionalism is essential to maintaining service quality, enhancing institutional competitiveness, and ensuring the sustainability of school programs amidst increasingly fierce educational competition. Regarding the findings above, the following table briefly presents the challenges in implementing strategic management for NSA activities at MT's Muhammadiyah Sukoharjo and their implications.

Table 3. The Challenges in Implementing Strategic Management

Challenges	Implication
1. Limited classroom space that is not commensurate with the number of prospective students.	Institutions need to undertake physical expansion by building new classrooms or optimising existing space to increase enrolment capacity.

2. The need to expand supporting facilities (laboratories, libraries, sports facilities, etc.)	Investing in relevant educational infrastructure is essential to support a quality learning process and attract prospective students.
3. The demand for strengthening digital systems in the NSA administration and services	Developing an integrated digital system will increase efficiency, transparency, and user satisfaction in the new student admissions process.
4. Limited quality and quantity of human resources (HR)	Improving the capacity of teachers and education personnel through training, strategic recruitment, and modern HR management is necessary to maintain service quality.

Source: Data Collection, 2026

Based on Table 3 above, it reveals that the main challenges in implementing strategic management of NSA at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo include limited classrooms, supporting facilities, digital systems, and human resources. This condition requires the institution to undertake physical expansion, particularly the construction of new classrooms and improvements to relevant educational infrastructure. Furthermore, strengthening the integrated digital system is considered crucial to increase efficiency, transparency, and user satisfaction in the NSA process. Efforts to increase the capacity of teachers and education personnel through training, strategic recruitment, and modern human resource management are also crucial steps in maintaining service quality and school competitiveness.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of strategic management in the admission of new students at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo is a complex and adaptive process, which integrates the dimensions of service quality, branding strategy, and organisational resource management to strengthen the competitiveness of educational institutions. These three aspects are intertwined in creating institutional value that is not only oriented towards increasing the number of students, but also towards building a sustainable reputation and public trust. This discussion interprets each finding in the context of strategic management theory, service quality theory, brand equity theory, and resource-based theory, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of NSA strategic management in modern Islamic educational institutions.

This school implements a value differentiation-oriented educational service management strategy for the NSA program. Value differentiation in the New Student Admission program is crucial for educational institutions to distinguish themselves in a competitive market (Suja'i, 2016). By emphasising unique strengths, schools can attract students and meet community needs effectively. This strategy not only serves as a marketing tool but also ensures the provision of high-quality, relevant educational services. The differentiation of educational services can significantly enhance customer value, as seen in various case studies and research findings. (Sahniarti, Ahmad, Z., & Zainal, 2024). This institution offers two service models: boarding and non-boarding, as a strategy to address the diverse needs of the community, providing flexibility for parents in

choosing education that emphasises religious aspects through a boarding system or a regular system with more flexible special programs. Moreover, a boarding-based educational service unit has garnered high levels of parental trust due to its clean dormitory facilities, structured daily student programs, and humane disciplinary oversight (Girard, T., & Pinar, 2021).

In addition, the existence of flagship programs such as memorising the Al-Quran, entrepreneurship, and information technology creates significant added value for the institution's image (Ramin, 2025). Qur'an memorisation is designed to reinforce students' spiritual and moral foundations, while entrepreneurship fosters life skills, independence, and creativity. At the same time, ICT-based learning is implemented to ensure students' readiness to navigate the challenges of the digital era. According to (Setiawan, 2024) The integration of these three components represents not only an innovation in curriculum design but also a deliberate strategy of differentiation to meet the dual demands of religious and technological education.

Furthermore, the increase in student enrollment to 722 students in 25 classes in the 2024/2025 academic year demonstrates the effectiveness of the service strategy in gaining public trust. This number not only reflects the madrasa's success in recruiting NSA, but also indicates that the capacity of learning spaces has reached, or even exceeded, ideal limits. Based on the service quality findings (Dzakwan, M., & Ubit, 2025) Superior educational service quality is determined by five main dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. In this context, MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing has succeeded in providing services that meet all of these dimensions, from providing adequate learning facilities, a fast and transparent administration system, to humanistic and empathetic teacher-student interactions (Ramin, 2025).

The increase in student numbers reflects public trust in the quality of service and the integrity of the institution. This supports (Romero-Carazas, R., Ochoa-Tataje, F. A., Mori-Rojas, G., Vilca-Cáceres, V. A., Gómez-Cáceres, F. Y., del Carpio-Delgado, F., Zárate-Suárez, J. S., & Espinoza-Casco, 2023) view that positive perceptions of service quality build a strong institutional image, increase user retention, and expand the customer base. Therefore, the service management strategy at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing is not merely operational, but also a strategic instrument in strengthening the reputation and social legitimacy of Islamic educational institutions in an era of increasingly dynamic competition.

Moreover, the branding and promotional strategies implemented by MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo play a crucial role in expanding public reach and increasing public trust. The multi-channel approach employed includes social media, word-of-mouth promotion, community-based social and educational activities, and collaboration with alumni (Cobos, 2021). Within the framework of brand equity theory, the strength of an educational institution's brand is built through three main dimensions: brand awareness, brand association, and brand loyalty. (Menon, V. P., & Barani, 2016). Through digital promotion strategies and community engagement, MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing has successfully strengthened public awareness of the institution's identity while building lasting emotional connections with prospective students and parents.

Community-based activities and alumni collaboration serve as a means of strengthening social trust, which, according to it, is a crucial element in building long-term loyalty. Alumni who succeed as public figures or moral role models indirectly serve as brand ambassadors, strengthening the institution's reputation in the community (Ramin, 2025). This strategy is not only effective in reaching local market segments but also extends the institution's influence to external areas, in line with the concept of relational marketing, which emphasises the importance

of long-term relationships with stakeholders for the institution's sustainability (West, D., Ford, J. B., Ibrahim, E., & Montecchi, 2022).

From a digital branding perspective, the use of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube serves as a strategic channel for showcasing school activities, student achievements, and learning innovations. Consistent with (Cobos, 2021) Findings: Digital media enables educational institutions to build interactive, two-way communication, thereby strengthening emotional engagement between the institution and the community. Therefore, MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing's digital branding strategy serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a means of building sustainable public trust (Caylan, 2024).

The third finding reveals several key challenges in implementing strategic management of NSA, encompassing limited classroom space, supporting facilities, digital systems, and human resources. These challenges illustrate the reality that rapid institutional growth must be balanced with infrastructure readiness and organisational capabilities. Successful strategy implementation is determined not only by a clear vision but also by the organisation's ability to manage its resources and supporting structures. (Ondiek, M. H., & Lewa, 2019). Limited classroom space and supporting facilities, such as laboratories and libraries, can hinder the expansion of student enrollment capacity and reduce the quality of the learning experience. Therefore, investment in relevant educational infrastructure is a strategic necessity for institutions to maintain service quality amidst growing student numbers (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021).

Beyond physical aspects, strengthening digital systems is also a necessity in the context of modern NSA administration and services. An integrated digital system increases efficiency, transparency, and user satisfaction, in accordance with the principles of digital governance in education management (Nur, F., Akbar, M. C., Sukarwoto, S., & Ulfa, 2024). Implementing an effective information system not only accelerates the registration process but also strengthens the accountability and professional image of the institution. From a human resources perspective, the limited quality and quantity of teaching and administrative staff are a challenge that requires serious attention (Westover, 2025).

Based on the resource-based view finding, Superior human resources are a strategic asset capable of creating sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, capacity building through training, strategic recruitment, and the implementation of modern HR management is a critical priority. This approach aligns with the strategic human resource management model (Geethanjali, N., Ashifa, K. M., Raina, A., Patil, J., Byloppilly, R., & Rajest, 2023) , which emphasises the importance of alignment between individual competencies and organisational goals to achieve long-term effectiveness (Ramin, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that strategic management in New Student Admission (NSA) at MTs Muhammadiyah Blimbing Sukoharjo successfully integrates service quality and school branding to enhance institutional competitiveness. To address the research focus on implementation, the school utilises service differentiation via boarding and non-boarding systems, supported by flagship programs in Qur'an memorisation, entrepreneurship, and ICT. Regarding the impact, these strategies significantly boost community trust and attractiveness, evidenced by an enrollment growth of 722 students and achievements in Olympiads and PORSENI. However, this rapid expansion creates critical institutional challenges, specifically limited classroom capacity,

inadequate supporting facilities (laboratories and libraries), the demand for integrated digital administrative services, and human resource constraints in both quality and quantity. Ultimately, the school's success shows that sustainable admission management relies not only on technical optimisation but also on an adaptive organisational culture rooted in Islamic principles.

This study contributes to Islamic Education Management literature by proposing a practical model that combines service excellence and strategic branding to strengthen madrasah competitiveness without losing its religious identity. However, a key limitation is its reliance on a qualitative case study restricted to a single institutional context, which limits generalizability. Therefore, future research is highly recommended to expand the scope through multi-institutional comparative frameworks or quantitative and mixed-method designs to validate these strategies on a broader scale. Longitudinal studies are also essential to evaluate the long-term sustainability of admission models during continuous digital transformation. Finally, future researchers should investigate the specific impacts of digital leadership, modern human resource training, and educational innovation to help private madrasahs maintain their market positioning amidst increasingly volatile institutional competition.

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