



Strategic Leadership of *Madrasah* Principals in Enhancing Institutional Attractiveness for Prospective Students

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the strategic leadership of *madrasah* principals in enhancing institutional attractiveness for prospective students. It addresses how *madrasahs* strengthen competitiveness through educational quality, flagship programs, branding, digital communication, parental trust, and community engagement while maintaining their Islamic identity.

Design/methods/approach – This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, documentation, and focus group discussions involving *madrasah* principals, teachers, school committee representatives, and parents. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through data organization, reduction, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Source and technique triangulation were applied to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Findings – The findings show that *madrasah* principals enhanced institutional attractiveness through integrated strategic leadership practices. These included improving learning quality, developing flagship programs such as *tahfidz*, language development, science and technology activities, and entrepreneurship, strengthening *madrasah* branding, using digital communication, building parental trust, and expanding community engagement. Supporting factors included leadership commitment, teacher participation, positive school culture, foundation support, and community trust, while inhibiting factors included budget constraints, resistance to change, infrastructure limitations, school competition, and negative stereotypes about *madrasahs*.

Research implications/limitations – This study implies that *madrasah* principals need strategic, collaborative, and value-based leadership to attract prospective students. However, it is limited to a qualitative case study and does not measure the impact of leadership strategies on enrollment growth.

Originality/value – This study links strategic leadership, institutional attractiveness, educational marketing, parental trust, and Islamic education management.

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INTRODUCTION

Madrasahs today operate in an increasingly competitive educational environment. Parents and prospective students have more options when choosing educational institutions, including public schools, private schools, Islamic schools, boarding schools, and other alternative educational models. This situation requires *madrasahs* to strengthen their institutional attractiveness by improving educational quality, developing distinctive programs, building public trust, and communicating their institutional identity effectively. In this context, institutional attractiveness is not merely related to promotion or student recruitment, but also to the ability of *madrasahs* to present themselves as credible, high-quality, value-based, and future-oriented Islamic educational institutions.

The decision of parents and prospective students to choose a school is influenced by various factors, including perceived educational quality, school reputation, teacher quality, facilities, tuition fees, location, religious values, and the availability of programs that match students' needs and aspirations. Atamturk (2018) explains that parents construct school quality through multiple dimensions, including academic standards, social environment, care, discipline, and institutional reputation. Similarly, Cantu et al. (2021) show that school choice is shaped by both parents' and school leaders' perceptions of educational quality, safety, values, and school identity. These studies indicate that attracting prospective students requires schools to understand how parents evaluate institutional quality and how they interpret the value offered by a school.

For *madrasahs*, the issue of institutional attractiveness is more complex because they must compete not only in academic quality but also in religious identity, moral formation, public image, and relevance to contemporary educational needs. *Madrasahs* are expected to provide strong Islamic education while also responding to modern demands such as digital literacy, language competence, science and technology, entrepreneurship, and character development. Therefore, the attractiveness of a *madrasah* depends on its ability to integrate Islamic values with educational innovation. This integration can become a distinctive advantage when it is managed strategically and communicated effectively to parents, students, and the wider community.

Strategic leadership plays a central role in strengthening the attractiveness of educational institutions. Principals are responsible for setting institutional direction, identifying competitive advantages, mobilizing resources, developing programs, building stakeholder collaboration, and ensuring that institutional strategies are aligned with the needs of society. Norman et al. (2025) argue that strategic leadership in schools can enhance educational quality when it is supported by transformational management and collaborative governance. Kunalan et al. (2022) also emphasize that strategic leadership practices are important in helping school leaders respond to risk, uncertainty, and institutional challenges. These perspectives suggest that principals' strategic leadership is essential in enabling schools to adapt to competition and improve institutional performance.

In the context of *madrasahs*, strategic leadership requires more than managerial ability. *Madrasah* principals must be able to develop educational programs that reflect Islamic values while also responding to the expectations of contemporary parents. This includes improving learning quality, developing flagship programs, strengthening teacher competence, expanding digital communication, building community partnerships, and managing

institutional reputation. Collaborative strategic leadership in *madrasahs* is particularly important because the success of institutional development depends on the involvement of teachers, parents, foundations, committees, communities, and other stakeholders. Suyatman et al. (2026) argue that collaborative strategic leadership in *madrasahs* can integrate Islamic governance and distributed leadership to support educational transformation. Although this perspective is relatively recent, it is relevant for understanding how *madrasah* principals mobilize various actors to strengthen institutional attractiveness.

Educational marketing and school branding have become increasingly important in the management of Islamic educational institutions. Educational marketing is not simply a promotional activity, but a strategic process of understanding the needs of parents and students, developing educational services, communicating institutional values, and building long-term trust. Ikhwan et al. (2025) show that marketing management in integrated Islamic schools in Indonesia reflects the need to balance competitiveness with educational values. Fatah et al. (2025) also highlight the importance of marketing mix strategies in increasing prospective students' interest in *madrasahs*. These studies suggest that *madrasah* principals need to understand marketing not as commercialization of education, but as a strategic effort to communicate quality, values, and institutional identity.

Institutional branding also shapes how parents and the community perceive *madrasahs*. A strong brand image helps educational institutions distinguish themselves from competitors, build emotional connection with stakeholders, and strengthen public trust. Garganourakis et al. (2023) note that school reputation is constructed through parents' voices and perceptions, indicating that reputation is not only created internally but also interpreted socially by the community. In Islamic education, branding must reflect the authenticity of institutional values and educational practices. Salsabilla et al. (2025) emphasize that branding and strategic management can contribute to student loyalty in Islamic education. This means that *madrasah* attractiveness depends not only on promotional messages, but also on consistency between institutional identity, educational quality, and stakeholder experience.

Digital communication has further changed how schools build attractiveness and reach prospective students. Websites, social media, online testimonials, digital storytelling, and real-time communication platforms allow *madrasahs* to communicate programs, achievements, facilities, and values more widely. Carundeng et al. (2024) show that social media marketing influences perceptions of faith-based private school branding among Generation Z. Abid et al. (2025) also demonstrate that school websites can function as digital marketing strategies in *madrasahs*. These findings indicate that digital communication has become an important part of institutional attractiveness, particularly in reaching parents and prospective students who rely on online information before making school choice decisions.

Despite the growing literature on strategic leadership, educational marketing, school choice, and Islamic education management, studies that specifically examine how *madrasah* principals use strategic leadership to enhance institutional attractiveness for prospective students remain limited. Many studies discuss educational marketing or school branding as management strategies, while others examine parental school choice and institutional reputation. However, fewer studies explain how these elements are integrated through the strategic leadership of *madrasah* principals. This gap is important because the attractiveness of *madrasahs* is not determined by isolated promotional activities, but by the principal's ability

to connect educational quality, flagship programs, branding, parental trust, community engagement, and Islamic institutional identity.

This study addresses that gap by examining the strategic leadership of *madrasah* principals in enhancing institutional attractiveness for prospective students. The study focuses on how principals develop strategies to improve educational quality, strengthen flagship programs, build *madrasah* branding, use digital communication, engage parents and communities, and manage supporting and inhibiting factors. By focusing on strategic leadership, this study views institutional attractiveness as the result of integrated leadership practices rather than merely marketing or promotional efforts.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to connect strategic leadership, educational marketing, school branding, school choice, and Islamic education management. Theoretically, this study contributes to educational leadership literature by explaining how *madrasah* principals strategically build institutional attractiveness in a competitive educational environment. Practically, the findings are expected to provide insights for *madrasah* principals, foundations, teachers, and Islamic education stakeholders in designing strategies that strengthen public trust, improve educational quality, and attract prospective students without losing the Islamic identity of the institution.

Based on this background, this study aims to describe the strategic leadership of *madrasah* principals in enhancing institutional attractiveness for prospective students. The study is guided by the following research questions: How do *madrasah* principals improve educational quality and develop flagship programs to attract prospective students? How do *madrasah* principals strengthen branding and digital communication? How do *madrasah* principals build parental trust and community engagement? What supporting and inhibiting factors influence the implementation of these strategies?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the strategic leadership of *madrasah* principals in enhancing institutional attractiveness for prospective students. This design was selected because the study aimed to understand leadership strategies, institutional practices, stakeholder perceptions, and contextual factors in a natural *madrasah* setting. The research focused on *madrasahs* that sought to strengthen their attractiveness through educational quality improvement, flagship program development, branding, digital communication, parental engagement, and community partnership. The participants consisted of *madrasah* principals, teachers, school committee representatives, and parents who were selected purposively based on their involvement in institutional development, student recruitment, school promotion, and stakeholder engagement.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, documentation, and focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted to explore the principals' strategic leadership practices, including program planning, quality improvement, branding initiatives, digital communication strategies, and efforts to build parental trust. Observations were used to examine school facilities, learning activities, promotional practices, flagship programs, and community engagement activities. Documentation was used to review school profiles, strategic plans, admission documents, promotional materials, social media content, program

reports, and student enrollment data. Focus group discussions with parents were conducted to obtain deeper insights into the factors influencing school choice and perceptions of *madrasah* attractiveness.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through data organization, data reduction, coding, theme development, and interpretation (Hardani et al., 2020). The analysis focused on identifying patterns related to strategic leadership, educational quality, flagship programs, branding and digital communication, parental trust, community engagement, and supporting and inhibiting factors. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing data from principals, teachers, committee representatives, and parents, as well as technique triangulation by comparing interviews, observations, documentation, and focus group discussion data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Miles et al., 2014). Ethical considerations were maintained by informing participants about the purpose of the study, ensuring voluntary participation, preserving confidentiality, and presenting the findings responsibly for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Improving Educational Quality and Flagship Programs

The findings indicate that one of the main strategies used by *madrasah* principals to enhance institutional attractiveness was improving educational quality and developing flagship programs. The principals viewed institutional attractiveness not merely as a matter of promotion, but as the result of educational quality that could be experienced directly by students and parents. In this context, the quality of learning, teacher competence, curriculum innovation, student achievement, and distinctive programs became important elements in shaping the public image of the *madrasah* (Sandi et al., 2026; Taruna & Harianto, 2025).

One principal explained that parents are increasingly selective in choosing educational institutions for their children. They do not only consider religious identity, but also examine academic quality, discipline, facilities, and future-oriented programs. As stated by one principal:

“Parents today do not choose a madrasah only because it teaches religion. They also ask about the quality of learning, teacher competence, student achievements, language programs, technology, and whether the school can prepare their children for the future. Therefore, we must show that madrasah education can be both religiously strong and academically competitive.”

This statement shows that *madrasah* attractiveness is closely related to the institution's ability to integrate Islamic values with educational innovation. The principal's strategic leadership was reflected in efforts to strengthen learning quality through curriculum development, teacher training, and the integration of religious and general knowledge. The *madrasah* sought to develop a balanced educational model in which students were expected to acquire academic competence, Islamic character, and practical skills relevant to contemporary life. This finding is consistent with the view that strategic leadership in schools requires leaders to align institutional vision, program development, and educational quality improvement in response to changing societal expectations (Norman et al., 2025; Zakariah et al., 2023).

Flagship programs also became a central strategy for increasing the attractiveness of the *madrasah*. The findings show that programs such as *tahfidz al-Qur'an*, bilingual learning, science and technology activities, entrepreneurship, and student achievement development were used to differentiate the *madrasah* from other educational institutions. These programs were designed not only to attract prospective students, but also to communicate the identity and competitive advantage of the *madrasah*. One teacher stated:

“The flagship programs are important because parents usually ask what makes this madrasah different from other schools. When we explain the tahfidz program, language development, science activities, and character education, they can see that the madrasah has clear added value.”

The development of flagship programs indicates that institutional attractiveness is constructed through distinctive educational offerings. In the context of school choice, parents tend to evaluate whether a school provides programs that correspond to their expectations, children's needs, and future aspirations. Atamturk (2018) explains that parents construct school quality through various dimensions, including academic standards, care, discipline, and institutional reputation. Similarly, Cantu et al. (2021) show that school choice is shaped by perceptions of school quality, safety, values, and institutional identity. In this study, flagship programs functioned as concrete evidence that the *madrasah* was able to provide religious education while also responding to modern educational demands.

The findings also show that the improvement of teacher competence was considered an important part of institutional attractiveness (Badarwan et al., 2026; Shabaitah & Akyurek, 2026; Tanjung et al., 2026; Ulfa et al., 2026). *Madrasah* principals encouraged teachers to participate in training, workshops, and professional development activities. Teacher quality was viewed as a strategic factor because parents' trust is strongly influenced by how teachers communicate, teach, guide students, and demonstrate professionalism. One principal emphasized:

“Good programs will not run well if teachers are not prepared. That is why we encourage teachers to continue learning, attend training, and improve their teaching methods. Parents can feel the difference when teachers are competent, communicative, and serious in guiding students.”

This finding suggests that strategic leadership is not only concerned with external promotion, but also internal capacity building. *Madrasah* principals must ensure that educational quality is supported by professional teachers, relevant curriculum, and effective learning processes. Kunalan et al. (2022) argue that strategic leadership is important in helping school leaders respond to institutional challenges and improve organizational performance. In this study, teacher development became part of the principal's strategy to strengthen the credibility and competitiveness of the *madrasah*.

Overall, the findings show that improving educational quality and developing flagship programs are fundamental strategies for enhancing *madrasah* attractiveness. These strategies are effective because they address the main concerns of parents and prospective students: quality, identity, relevance, and future opportunities. The principal's strategic leadership was

visible in the ability to connect institutional vision with concrete programs, teacher development, and the integration of Islamic values with modern educational practices. Thus, the attractiveness of the *madrasah* was not built through promotion alone, but through educational substance that could strengthen public trust.

Strengthening Madrasah Branding and Digital Communication

The second major finding concerns the strengthening of *madrasah* branding and digital communication. The principals recognized that public perception plays an important role in attracting prospective students. A *madrasah* with good educational quality may not be widely recognized if it fails to communicate its strengths effectively. Therefore, branding and communication strategies were developed to introduce the *madrasah*'s identity, programs, achievements, facilities, and values to the wider community.

Branding was understood as a strategic effort to build a positive and distinctive institutional image. The *madrasah* sought to present itself as an Islamic educational institution that is disciplined, achievement-oriented, religious, modern, and responsive to the needs of society. This branding was communicated through school profiles, banners, brochures, social media content, student achievement publications, and public events. One committee representative stated:

“People will know the quality of the madrasah if the school communicates it well. Sometimes the programs are good, but the community does not know about them. Branding helps parents understand the strengths of the madrasah and why they should choose it.”

This statement shows that branding is not merely promotional decoration, but a way of making institutional value visible to the public. Garganourakis et al. (2023) emphasize that school reputation is constructed through parents' voices and perceptions. This means that reputation is shaped not only by what schools claim, but also by how stakeholders experience, interpret, and share information about the institution. In the context of *madrasahs*, branding must therefore be consistent with actual educational practices, because public trust depends on the alignment between institutional image and real experience.

Digital communication became an increasingly important part of the branding strategy. The findings show that *madrasahs* used websites, social media platforms, digital posters, online registration information, and documentation of school activities to reach parents and prospective students. Digital platforms were used to share information about programs, achievements, religious activities, student creativity, and admission procedures. One teacher involved in school promotion explained:

“Social media is very influential now. Many parents first see the school from Instagram, Facebook, or the website. If the information is clear and the content is interesting, they become curious and then come to the school to ask for more information.”

This finding indicates that digital communication has changed the way *madrasahs* interact with prospective students and parents. Carundeng et al. (2024) show that social media marketing can influence perceptions of faith-based private school branding, especially among younger generations. Abid et al. (2025) also demonstrate that school websites can

function as digital marketing tools in *madrasahs*. In this study, digital communication helped the *madrasah* expand its reach, present institutional strengths, and increase public awareness.

The use of digital communication also supported transparency and parental engagement. Information about school programs, admission procedures, activities, and achievements could be accessed more easily by parents. This helped reduce uncertainty and strengthened parents' confidence in the institution. One parent said:

"Before registering my child, I looked for information through social media and asked other parents. I became interested because the school often shared student activities, achievements, and religious programs. It made me feel that the madrasah was active and serious in educating students."

This statement shows that parents' school choice is influenced not only by direct visits but also by digital impressions and peer information. Digital communication creates an initial image that can shape parental interest before they interact directly with the school (Amiruddin et al., 2026; Aritonang et al., 2026; Fathurrochman et al., 2026; Tjay et al., 2025). Therefore, *madrasah* principals need to manage digital communication professionally, ensuring that information is accurate, attractive, and consistent with institutional values.

However, the findings also suggest that branding and digital communication must be supported by real quality. Promotional messages that are not supported by actual educational practices may weaken public trust. In this regard, strategic leadership is needed to ensure coherence between branding, program implementation, service quality, and stakeholder experience. Ikhwan et al. (2025) emphasize that marketing management in integrated Islamic schools must balance competitiveness and educational values. Similarly, Fatah et al. (2025) show that marketing mix strategies can increase prospective students' interest when they are connected to the quality of educational services.

Overall, *madrasah* branding and digital communication served as strategic tools for enhancing institutional attractiveness. The principals used branding to clarify institutional identity and digital communication to expand public reach. These strategies were effective when they were supported by educational quality, flagship programs, stakeholder trust, and consistency between image and reality. Thus, strategic leadership in *madrasah* branding involves not only promoting the institution, but also managing reputation, communicating values, and building long-term trust with parents and the community.

Building Parental Trust and Community Engagement

The third finding shows that parental trust and community engagement were important components of the principals' strategic leadership in enhancing *madrasah* attractiveness. The principals understood that parents' decisions to enroll their children in a *madrasah* were strongly influenced by trust, communication, institutional reputation, and the perceived compatibility between school programs and family expectations. Therefore, the *madrasahs* sought to build close relationships with parents and the surrounding community through communication, parenting programs, social activities, and stakeholder collaboration.

Parental trust was built through transparency and consistent communication. The *madrasahs* provided information about learning programs, student progress, religious activities, achievements, and admission procedures through both direct and digital communication channels. One parent explained:

“We feel more confident when the school communicates openly. Information about student activities, learning progress, and religious programs is shared regularly. As parents, we want to know not only the facilities, but also how the school guides our children every day.”

This statement indicates that parents evaluate *madrasah* attractiveness through everyday institutional communication and perceived care for students. Hamlin & Cheng (2020) argue that parental satisfaction is influenced by involvement, empowerment, and the quality of school-family relationships. In this study, parental trust increased when the *madrasah* was able to maintain open communication and demonstrate responsibility in educating students.

Parenting programs were also used as a strategy to strengthen school-family partnerships. The *madrasahs* organized parenting seminars, consultation sessions, and communication forums to help parents understand the school’s educational approach and support children’s development at home. These activities helped align expectations between the *madrasah* and parents. One principal stated:

“We do not want parents to only register their children and then leave everything to the school. Education must involve cooperation between the school and the family. Through parenting programs, we explain our vision, our learning system, and the role parents can play at home.”

This finding suggests that institutional attractiveness is strengthened when parents perceive the *madrasah* as a partner in educating children. Nugroho et al. (2024) show that school enrollment strategies are closely related to parental decision-making and the school’s ability to communicate its value to parents. In this study, parenting programs functioned not only as educational services, but also as trust-building mechanisms that helped parents feel involved in the *madrasah*’s mission.

Community engagement also became a significant strategy. The *madrasahs* developed relationships with community leaders, religious figures, local organizations, alumni, and surrounding communities. Social service programs, religious events, cultural activities, and student participation in community programs were used to strengthen the *madrasah*’s visibility and social legitimacy. A committee representative explained:

“The madrasah becomes more trusted when it is present in the community. People see the students’ manners, religious activities, and social programs. From there, they begin to believe that the madrasah is not only teaching in the classroom, but also contributing to society.”

This statement shows that community engagement contributes to institutional attractiveness by making the *madrasah* socially visible and morally credible. Putra & Saerozi (2025) emphasize that public trust in Islamic educational institutions is shaped by marketing management, service quality, and institutional relationships with the community. In this study, community engagement helped build a positive public perception of the *madrasah* and strengthened its position as a value-based educational institution.

The role of alumni and word-of-mouth communication was also important. Parents often obtained information not only from official school promotion, but also from other

parents, alumni, community members, and religious leaders. Positive experiences shared by stakeholders became informal promotional resources that strengthened the *madrasah's* reputation. Garganourakis et al. (2023) highlight that school reputation is strongly shaped by parents' voices and social perceptions. Therefore, principals need to manage stakeholder experience carefully because reputation is built through both institutional communication and community narratives.

The findings indicate that parental trust and community engagement cannot be separated from strategic leadership. The principal's role involved creating communication systems, building partnerships, encouraging parent participation, and ensuring that the *madrasah* maintained a positive relationship with its social environment. In this sense, the principal acted not only as an internal manager but also as an institutional representative who connected the *madrasah* with the wider community.

Overall, parental trust and community engagement were essential in enhancing *madrasah* attractiveness. Parents were more likely to consider a *madrasah* when they perceived it as trustworthy, communicative, caring, religiously committed, and socially connected. Community engagement strengthened the *madrasah's* reputation, while parental involvement created emotional and relational bonds between families and the institution. Thus, strategic leadership in *madrasahs* requires the ability to build trust-based relationships with parents and communities as part of long-term institutional development.

Managing Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Enhancing Madrasah Attractiveness

The fourth finding concerns the supporting and inhibiting factors that influenced the principals' efforts to enhance institutional attractiveness. The findings show that strategic leadership did not operate in a neutral context. *Madrasah* principals had to manage internal and external factors that either supported or constrained the implementation of institutional strategies. These factors included leadership commitment, teacher readiness, organizational culture, foundation support, community trust, financial limitations, resistance to change, infrastructure gaps, competition with other schools, and public stereotypes about *madrasahs*.

One of the strongest supporting factors was the commitment of the principal and teachers. The principals' commitment to improving quality, developing flagship programs, strengthening branding, and engaging stakeholders created a sense of institutional direction. Teachers' commitment also supported the implementation of programs because strategies would not be effective without teacher participation. One principal explained:

"A strategy will only remain a document if teachers do not move together. The principal may design the program, but its success depends on the commitment of teachers, committees, parents, and the foundation. That is why we try to build the same understanding before implementing new programs."

This statement reflects the importance of collective commitment in strategic leadership. Norman et al. (2025) emphasize that strategic leadership in schools requires collaborative governance and the ability to mobilize organizational actors. In this study, the principals' strategic leadership was visible in their efforts to align stakeholders around shared institutional goals.

Organizational culture also supported the implementation of attractiveness strategies. A culture of discipline, religious commitment, innovation, and service helped strengthen the

madrasah's image. When teachers, staff, and students consistently demonstrated positive behavior, the public perception of the *madrasah* improved. One teacher stated:

“Parents see not only the building or brochure. They also see how teachers welcome them, how students behave, and how disciplined the school environment is. The culture of the school becomes part of the attraction.”

This finding indicates that attractiveness is shaped not only by visible programs but also by institutional culture. Salsabilla et al. (2025) argue that branding and strategic management in Islamic education are related to student loyalty and institutional identity. In this study, school culture functioned as a lived form of branding, because it communicated the *madrasah's* values through daily practices.

External support from parents, community leaders, alumni, foundations, and government programs also strengthened institutional attractiveness. Support from the foundation and school committee helped provide resources for program development, while community support increased public legitimacy. At the same time, technological development created opportunities for digital promotion and online communication. These supporting factors helped *madrasahs* expand their reach and improve their competitiveness.

However, the principals also faced several inhibiting factors. Budget constraints were among the most frequently mentioned challenges. Developing facilities, improving teacher competence, managing digital promotion, and implementing flagship programs required financial support. One committee representative explained:

“The ideas are many, but not all can be implemented immediately because the budget is limited. The school must decide which programs are most urgent and which can be developed gradually.”

This finding shows that strategic leadership requires prioritization. Principals must be able to select programs based on urgency, feasibility, and institutional impact. Kunalan et al. (2022) note that strategic leadership involves the ability to respond to uncertainty and institutional constraints. In this study, budget limitations forced principals to develop gradual and realistic strategies.

Resistance to change was another challenge. Some teachers or stakeholders were not immediately ready to adopt new programs, digital promotion, or more competitive service standards. This resistance was not always caused by rejection of innovation, but sometimes by limited capacity, habit, or fear of additional workload. A principal stated:

“Not everyone accepts change quickly. Some teachers need time. We cannot force everything at once, but we need to guide them, explain the benefits, and involve them in the process.”

This statement indicates that strategic leadership requires persuasive communication and capacity building. Principals must manage change by involving teachers, providing support, and reducing anxiety. If resistance is ignored, institutional strategies may fail at the implementation stage.

Another inhibiting factor was the persistence of negative stereotypes about *madrasahs*. Some parents still perceived *madrasahs* as institutions that focus only on religious education and are less competitive in science, technology, language, or future career preparation. This perception created a challenge for *madrasahs* in attracting prospective students. One teacher explained:

“Some people still think that madrasahs are only strong in religion. That is why we need to show student achievements, science programs, language programs, and technology-based learning, so that the community understands that madrasahs can also compete academically.”

This finding reinforces the need for branding, communication, and educational quality improvement. Fadilah et al. (2024) argue that innovative marketing strategies can help Islamic educational institutions respond to public perception and strengthen competitiveness. In this study, principals attempted to overcome stereotypes by developing programs that combined Islamic identity with academic and modern competencies.

Overall, the findings show that enhancing *madrasah* attractiveness requires principals to manage both opportunities and constraints strategically. Supporting factors such as leadership commitment, teacher participation, school culture, community support, and digital communication strengthened the implementation of strategies. Meanwhile, inhibiting factors such as limited budgets, resistance to change, infrastructure gaps, school competition, and negative stereotypes required adaptive and realistic leadership responses. Thus, strategic leadership is not only about designing attractive programs, but also about mobilizing resources, managing change, overcoming constraints, and ensuring that institutional strategies remain aligned with the mission of Islamic education.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the strategic leadership of *madrasah* principals plays an important role in enhancing institutional attractiveness for prospective students. The findings indicate that *madrasah* attractiveness is not built merely through promotional activities, but through integrated leadership practices that connect educational quality, flagship programs, institutional branding, digital communication, parental trust, and community engagement. Principals strengthened institutional attractiveness by improving learning quality, developing distinctive programs such as *tahfidz*, language development, science and technology activities, and entrepreneurship, as well as ensuring that these programs remained aligned with the Islamic identity of the *madrasah*.

The study also reveals that branding, digital communication, and stakeholder trust are central elements in the strategic leadership of *madrasah* principals. Websites, social media, school profiles, student achievement publications, and digital promotion were used to communicate institutional values and programs to parents and prospective students. At the same time, parental trust and community engagement were developed through transparent communication, parenting programs, collaboration with community leaders, social activities, and stakeholder participation. Supporting factors included leadership commitment, teacher participation, positive school culture, foundation support, and community trust. Meanwhile,

inhibiting factors included budget constraints, resistance to change, infrastructure limitations, competition with other schools, and negative stereotypes about *madrasahs*.

This study has several limitations. First, it used a qualitative case study design, so the findings provide contextual and in-depth understanding but cannot be generalized to all *madrasahs*. Second, the study focused mainly on leadership strategies and stakeholder perceptions, without quantitatively measuring the direct impact of these strategies on enrollment growth or long-term institutional competitiveness. Third, the data were limited to interviews, observations, documentation, and focus group discussions within a specific fieldwork context. Future research is recommended to involve more *madrasahs* from different regions, apply comparative or mixed-method designs, and examine the relationship between strategic leadership, educational marketing, parental school choice, institutional reputation, enrollment trends, and the sustainability of *madrasah* competitiveness.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The author(s) acknowledge the use of ChatGPT in the writing process of this manuscript, particularly to assist with academic language polishing, paraphrasing, and improving the flow of ideas. The author(s) reviewed and modified all AI-assisted outputs and assume full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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