Optimization of Digital Platforms in School Branding Strategies at SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta

Amy Mustauda   ameymustauda@gmail.com
Bunga Septia Nurul Fatikhah   bungasnf04@gmail.com
Desti Widiani   destiwidi@yahoo.com

Affiliation (Faculty of Education Sciences, Raden Mas Said State Islamic University Surakarta, Indonesia)

ABSTRACT

The development of information technology in the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era requires schools to adapt to digital branding, but many private schools still experience a gap between the demands of digital transformation and practice in the field. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. The research participant was the person in charge of the school's social media, who was chosen purposively because of his direct involvement in managing digital accounts. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews and documentation of social media posts, websites, and school digital promotional materials. Data analysis is carried out by reducing data, presenting data, and drawing conclusions, which are strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques to ensure the validity of the data. The research results show that schools have optimized various digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and websites to expand the reach of information and build a positive image. The branding strategy implemented is communicative, collaborative, and adaptive, even though it still faces obstacles in upload consistency, limited human resources, and a lack of supporting facilities. This research provides the implication that strategic use of digital platforms can be an effective means of strengthening school branding, increasing public trust, and supporting the sustainability of educational institutions in the digital era.

Keywords: school branding; digital platforms; social media.

Introduction

The era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0 has accelerated digital transformation in various aspects of life, including education. Schools are not only expected to excel in academic quality and facilities, but also in building a positive image and reputation through the use of information technology (Faiz,

2023). The school's image is a strategic factor because it plays a role in shaping public perception, which influences the level of public trust and interest in prospective new students (Triwijayanti et al., 2022). A survey by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association reveals that 79.5% of Indonesia's population is connected to the internet, indicating that digital media has become the primary means of searching for and disseminating information (APJII, 2024). Thus, managing a school's image through digital platforms is a strategic necessity, enabling educational institutions to survive and compete in the information era (Simamora et al., 2025).

The government has set the ideal direction for education management through Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which emphasizes the importance of developing students' potential and equitable access to information. Article 7 of the law grants parents the right to access information about their child's educational progress, which implies that schools need to provide an open and easily accessible communication system (Undang-Undang (UU) Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 Tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional, 2003). In addition, Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 3 of 2025 Article 6 stipulates a zoning policy for student admissions based on domicile to ensure equitable distribution of education (Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan Dasar Dan Menengah Republik Indonesia, 2025). Therefore, ideally, educational institutions are required to be adaptive in implementing equal access policies by utilizing digital technology so that educational information can be accessed inclusively by the entire community (Astuti et al., 2025).

Even though national education regulations emphasize openness and equal access, practice in the field still shows a gap between policy and implementation (Nurhayati et al., 2025). The zoning system often creates obstacles for private schools, which lose flexibility in reaching prospective students outside their area (Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan Dasar Dan Menengah Republik Indonesia, 2025). As a result, many private schools have to compete harder with state schools in the same area to maintain the number of students (Amalia & Kholik, 2025). On the other hand, not all educational institutions make maximum use of digital platforms as promotional and public communication media (Faiz, 2023). Mulyani's research confirms that the lack of consistency in digital content management is the cause of the institution's weak image in the digital era (Mulyani et al., 2025). This shows that there is a real gap between the demands of digital transformation and schools' readiness to optimize technology-based branding strategies.

One solution that can bridge this gap is optimizing digital platforms in school branding strategies. The use of social media, official websites, and interactive digital content has proven effective in expanding the reach of information and increasing community involvement (Sudirman et al., 2024). Digital branding allows educational institutions to display their identity and superior values more dynamically and communicatively (Simamora et al., 2025). In this context, Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta Middle School, which was founded in 2021 under the Djama'atul Ichwan Foundation, faces the challenge of building trust and existence amidst competition from other superior schools (Admin SMP

DJI, 2020). Therefore, implementing a digital branding strategy is a strategic step to strengthen the position of private schools in the era of technology-based competition.

Based on the results of initial observations, SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta is a private school that has digital facilities such as social media accounts and learning technology devices, but its use for school branding activities is still limited to disseminating routine information, and has not been strategically directed at building the image and reputation of the institution. This condition shows that there is a gap between the policy of equal access to education and the reality of the low level of optimization of digital technology in strengthening school identity. Therefore, an important question arises that needs to be studied scientifically, namely, how digital platform optimization is applied in the school branding strategy at Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta Middle School. This research is expected to provide an empirical overview of the application of digital branding in private schools and offer a strategic model to increase competitiveness and public trust in educational institutions in the digital era.

Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand in depth the phenomenon of optimizing digital platforms in school branding strategies at Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta Middle School. As explained by Creswell (2017), qualitative research is used to examine the meaning that individuals or groups give to a social or humanitarian problem through an interpretive and natural process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants in this research were selected using purposive sampling, namely, people who were considered to best understand the problems and activities of school branding through digital platforms. The primary source of data is the individual responsible for social media (Waka Kesiswaan) at SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta, who directly manages the school's official account and oversees the published content.

The data collection techniques employed included semi-structured in-depth interviews and documentation. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, as agreed upon with the source. The researcher created an interview guide designed to gather information about the digital platforms utilized, digital branding strategies, and factors that hinder school branding. In addition, documentation, such as social media posts, was collected to support the interview data. This documentation helps the researcher gain a better understanding of the specific strategies that the school has implemented.

The data analysis process consists of three key steps: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The first step, data reduction, occurs once all the relevant data has been gathered and organized according to specific needs and research focus. Next, the researcher presents the data in a narrative format, providing explanations of the findings. Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the data collected in the field.

To ensure the validity of data, researchers focus on credibility. Credibility is upheld through triangulation of sources and techniques; researchers compare

and align information from two distinct data sources, interviews, and documentation. (Sumbodo et al., 2024).

Results

Forms of Digital Platform Optimization

Based on the results of the interview, SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta has optimized several main digital platforms as a means of communication and promotion, namely Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and the school website. Since its founding in 2021, the school has utilized social media as part of a strategy to establish a digital-based identity. The content shared includes documentation of student activities and school events, showcasing students' religious values, achievements, and various activities. Uploading activities are carried out almost every day, with a pattern of one video a day, showing consistency in publication, even though it is not yet supported by formal digital marketing planning. These findings demonstrate the school's commitment to maintaining a sustainable digital presence as a means of building a positive image of the institution. For example, the Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta Middle School YouTube platform actively uploads content from student activities.
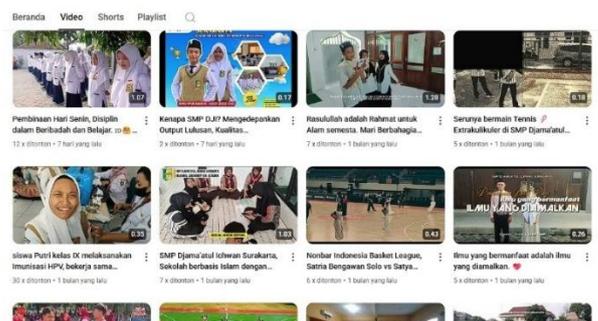

Figure 1. YouTube Content

Figure 1 displays various content uploaded by the YouTube admin of SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta. Based on this documentation, schools have begun actively using the YouTube platform since September 19 2020 as a means of digital-based communication and promotion. To date, the number of videos that have been uploaded has reached 336, with a total of around 44,500 views. The content displayed is very diverse, including student development activities, extracurricular activities, learning, school announcements, and documentation of religious events and student achievements. This variety of content reflects the school's efforts to present its identity, culture, and positive activities to the wider community.

In terms of audience reach, the average number of viewers for each video ranges from 5 to 30 views within 7 to 30 days after being uploaded. Meanwhile, videos that have been published for more than 60 days show an increase in the number of viewers to around 30 to hundreds of views. While the number of views is still low, maintaining consistency in uploading content is a crucial step to enhance a school's digital presence amid competition among educational institutions. This effort also shows the school's commitment to utilizing digital

platforms as branding media and a means of expanding the reach of information. After the YouTube platform, the next digital media optimized by the school is the official website.

Figure 2. School Website

Figure 2 shows the appearance of the official website of SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta, which can be accessed openly by the public. This website is one of the school's main means of disseminating information quickly, easily, and in a structured manner to the public. The website features several important sections, including school profiles, vision and mission statements, information on New Student Admissions (PPDB) for 2025, activity galleries, school news and agendas, significant events, and student commitments. The existence of these various menus shows the school's efforts to build a transparent communication system and provide easy access to information for parents, prospective students, and the general public.

Observations indicate that this website is still being developed and improved. This is evident from the inconsistent content updates, with the last upload noted in July 2025. This condition presents a challenge for schools that are trying to optimize their websites as branding tools and digital information centers. If managed more effectively and updated regularly, a website can serve as a strategic platform for enhancing the school's image, broadening its promotional reach, and building public trust. In addition to their websites, many schools actively use Instagram as another digital media platform.

Figure 3. School Instagram

Figure 3 illustrates the official Instagram account of SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta. This account was established in August 2019 as part of the school's initiative to introduce its identity and activities to the broader community through social media. The initial content uploaded focuses on introducing the school, congratulating on national and religious holidays, and motivational messages to build a positive image of the school. As time goes by, the type of content uploaded develops and becomes more diverse, including documentation of learning activities, student activities, and extracurriculars, as well as various superior school programs, both online during the pandemic and offline after face-to-face learning is resumed.

To date, the school's Instagram account has had 774 posts and 590 followers, showing consistency in the school's digital activities. Instagram admins actively upload photos and videos almost every day as part of a strategy to build a digital presence. However, based on observations, uploading activities stopped on September 17, 2025. Uploaded content not only functions as documentation of activities, but also as a means of promotion and public communication media to strengthen the school's brand image. Through this platform, schools can interact directly with the community, prospective students, parents, and alumni. Instagram is a social media platform that has a wide audience reach, so it has the potential to continue to be optimized as an effective digital branding tool. After the Instagram platform, the next social media used by schools is Facebook.

Figure 4. School Facebook Account

Figure 4 shows the official Facebook account of SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta. Similar to other social media platforms, this Facebook account has been actively used since 2019 as part of the school's strategy to expand its reach and promote information through digital channels. Through this platform, the school shares various types of content, such as information about learning activities, important announcements, promotion of flagship programs, and documentation of school events. Facebook was chosen as one of the main media platforms because it has a broad user base that includes parents, the general public, and prospective students.

Although the school's Facebook account remains active to this day, the frequency of content uploads has not been consistent. Based on the review, the most recent post was made on October 3, 2025, while the previous one was on September 17, 2025. This posting pattern indicates that Facebook has not been utilized optimally compared to other platforms such as Instagram. In fact, Facebook has great potential as a medium for public communication and school

promotion due to its wider audience reach and diverse interactive features. With more planned and consistent management, the school's Facebook account could serve as an effective tool to strengthen digital branding, build closer engagement with the community, and enhance public participation. Following Facebook, another active social media platform used by the school is TikTok.

Figure 5. School TikTok Account

Figure 5 shows the official TikTok account of SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta. The account has been actively used since 2022 as part of the school's strategy to expand its promotional reach through social media platforms popular among students and the general public. Based on observations, the school's TikTok account has 101 followers, follows 14 other accounts, and has received a total of 2,131 likes. Most of the uploaded content consists of short videos showcasing student activities, such as learning sessions, school events, and moments of togetherness within the school environment. This short-video strategy aligns with TikTok's platform characteristics, which rely on visual and audio engagement to quickly capture audience attention.

Although the account has been actively used, the number of viewers per video remains relatively low, with each video receiving fewer than 200 views. This condition indicates that the published content has not frequently appeared on the For You Page (FYP) or reached a wider audience. This may be due to inconsistent posting schedules, the use of less relevant audio or trends, and limited content packaging strategies. Nevertheless, TikTok holds great potential to support the school's branding efforts if managed more creatively and strategically. With well-planned content, effective use of trending topics, and increased user engagement, this platform could serve as an effective channel to introduce the school to a broader audience. Following TikTok, the last digital medium utilized by the school is WhatsApp.

Figure 6. WhatsApp Platform

Figure 6 shows an example of a WhatsApp status shared by one of the teachers at SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta. The WhatsApp platform is used as both an internal communication tool and an effective informal promotional medium due to its direct reach to parents, teachers, and the school community. According to the informant, the school's administrator regularly creates short content in the form of images or videos and shares it with teachers and parents through WhatsApp groups. The content is then often reposted by teachers on their personal statuses, allowing promotional messages to spread more widely and organically without incurring additional costs.

The types of content shared are generally related to the school's routine activities, such as documentation of morning routines, worship practices, learning activities, and various flagship programs. This strategy represents a simple yet effective use of social media to strengthen the school's branding and quickly expand the reach of information. Since WhatsApp statuses are viewed by personal contacts, the messages conveyed tend to be more personal, credible, and easily accessible to parents of prospective students. Although it is not a public platform like other social media, the use of WhatsApp plays an important role in fostering close communication between the school, teachers, parents, and the surrounding community.

Digital Branding Strategies Implemented by the School

Although SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta does not yet have a formal digital marketing team, the school has implicitly implemented three forms of digital branding strategies: communicative, collaborative, and adaptive.

The communicative strategy is reflected in the consistent use of visual messages that include the school's logo and accreditation status, as well as religious narratives and student achievements. This approach reinforces the school's image as a modern Islamic institution that is progressive and open to digital innovation.

The collaborative strategy is evident in the involvement of teachers, students, and Organisasi Siswa Intra Sekolah (OSIS) in content production, along with the support of parents who actively repost school uploads through WhatsApp groups and statuses. This practice demonstrates that digital branding is the result of the collective work of the entire school community, rather than solely the responsibility of social media administrators.

Meanwhile, the adaptive strategy emerges as a response to the zoning policy, which limits conventional promotional methods. The school utilizes digital platforms to extend its promotional reach beyond the zoned areas, demonstrating flexibility in responding to government regulations. This approach aligns with the findings of Eriani (2025), who emphasizes the importance of educational institutions adapting to policies and public dynamics through two-way digital communication (Eriani et al., 2025). An example of the school's digital branding strategy can be seen in the involvement of students in content creation, as illustrated in the following image:
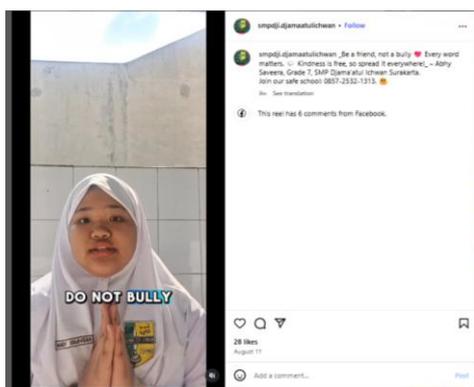
Figure 7. Collaborative Content with Students

Figure 7 shows one of the daily vlog contents featuring the direct participation of a student from SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta. In this content, the student delivers a moral message about the importance of avoiding bullying within the school environment. Such content functions not only as an informational medium but also as an educational tool that helps cultivate social awareness and positive character among students. By involving students directly, the school indirectly encourages active participation and fosters a sense of ownership toward the messages being conveyed.

In addition, each post is accompanied by an informative caption that includes the school's name, a positive message, and contact information, making the content an integral part of the school's digital branding strategy. The inclusion of school identity elements in every post helps strengthen the institution's public image while organically expanding its promotional reach. This strategy demonstrates that school branding does not have to be carried out solely by a marketing team; students can also serve as digital communication ambassadors, conveying messages in a more personal, authentic, and easily relatable manner to the audience.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The successful optimization of digital platforms at SMP Djama'atul Ichwan is supported by several key factors, including strong leadership support, active participation from teachers and students, and an organizational culture that embraces innovation. The principal provides both moral encouragement and incentives for the social media team, while teachers demonstrate high enthusiasm in sharing learning materials and documenting school activities. In addition, the teachers' basic digital literacy skills further strengthen the school's capacity to maintain consistent and sustainable digital publications.

However, there are several obstacles, including limited supporting facilities such as professional cameras and editing equipment, the absence of a dedicated digital marketing team, and inconsistent posting schedules due to the school's busy activities. Another challenge is the fluctuating nature of social media algorithms, which affects the reach and public interaction with the school's content.

Discussion

Based on interviews and documentation, SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta is a secondary school established in 2021 that is currently facing challenges in building its image amid competition with well-established schools already recognized by the community. To expand the reach of information and strengthen the school's image, the school leverages digital technology as a branding strategy. In addition to distributing brochures, teachers and the school team actively use various social media platforms, including the official website, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp. The shared content includes information about the school, student activities, motivational messages, greetings for special occasions, and other activities. Each post is also accompanied by brief information containing the school's contact details to facilitate communication. Content is uploaded consistently, following a pattern of one video post per day, as an effort to maintain digital presence and build a positive school image within the community.

This effort is carried out to introduce the school to the wider community comprehensively and to build a positive image expected to have a long-term impact on the school's development. Content creation is based on actual conditions in the field, enabling an authentic representation of the school's activities and character. Posting content on social media also reflects the school leadership's support for the digital branding strategy. Community responses have been quite positive, as evidenced by various comments and expressions of appreciation directed at teachers and students. In addition, parental support strengthens these efforts through suggestions, feedback, and participation in resharing content shared by the school.

The digital branding strategy implemented by the school is not only carried out routinely but also includes evaluation of each piece of content uploaded. According to the informant, the social media administrator actively monitors the number of viewers for every post. If particular content proves engaging and attracts a large audience, the administrator creates similar content using the same template to maintain optimal results. However, the school's digital branding strategy is not yet fully well-planned. Content uploads remain irregular, occurring only when content is available, without consideration of strategically timed posting. As a result, the potential for content to reach a wider audience, including opportunities to appear on the For You Page (FYP) or go viral, has not been fully maximized.

This situation constitutes one of the main obstacles for the school in marketing itself and introducing its presence to the community. As a newly established institution, SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta does not yet have a strong image, and public awareness of its existence remains low. Another challenge is the absence of a dedicated team to handle branding and marketing strategies professionally, resulting in delays and inconsistency in content uploads. Additionally, limitations in facilities and infrastructure act as inhibiting factors. In practice, content creation and editing still rely on basic tools such as mobile phones, which prevents the content from achieving optimal quality to fully support the school's digital branding strategy.

The dissemination of content on social media has not yet shown a significant impact on increasing student enrollment. In practice, most parents learn about the school through word-of-mouth communication rather than solely from digital content. Nevertheless, the presence of social media still provides important benefits as a means of widely and easily accessible information dissemination. Through digital platforms, parents can gain a clearer understanding of the school's profile, activities, and strengths, thereby supporting their decision-making process.

These findings align with the research conducted by (Nurhidayah, 2022) which states that one of the main challenges in managing school branding is the limited human resources with skills in digital marketing. This situation is further reinforced by the fact that many Islamic educational institutions do not yet have dedicated teams managing social media professionally, resulting in suboptimal content management and audience interaction. Another study on digital marketing strategies at SMA Yadika 6 Pondok Aren also demonstrated that leveraging social media combined with four key elements brand equity, brand image, brand awareness, and customer satisfaction can strengthen the school's image. This is because the school not only posts student activities but also highlights students' achievements. Another advantage of using digital platforms in branding strategies is their motivational effect on students, as every student who wins a competition is featured on social media. This finding is consistent with the study by (Akhbar et al., 2024) conducted at SMK Negeri 4 Malang. The school uses the website Grafikarsa.com to upload students' works and portfolios. The presence of this website is expected to attract prospective students to enroll in SMK Negeri 4 Malang.

However, the school still faces challenges in content management, particularly because content ideas often arise spontaneously and are unplanned, whereas they should be conceptualized in advance to ensure a more organized and effective approach (Saputri et al., 2023). Nevertheless, various studies indicate that social media plays a crucial role in supporting the promotion of educational institutions. This aligns with the findings of Dindya Vikri at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember, which reported that the effectiveness of social media utilization in school promotion reached 81% (Roemaissha, 2023). Another study by (Hidayah, 2024) at MA Tsamrotul Huda Pulokulon Grobogan found that implementing branding strategies such as improving school accreditation, enhancing student behavior, increasing student achievements, and developing flagship programs can improve the school's image and boost public trust in enrolling their children at the institution. These findings underscore that, despite existing challenges and limitations, social media remains a strategic instrument for strengthening school branding.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the optimization of digital platforms at SMP Djama'atul Ichwan Surakarta represents a strategic step in building a positive image and expanding the school's information reach to the community. The use of various platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp,

and the official website, has become an effective means of communication and promotion, particularly for a newly established private school. Through consistent content, the school is able to introduce its identity, vision, mission, and strengths to the public. The branding strategies implemented include a communicative approach through consistent visual messaging, a collaborative approach through the involvement of teachers, students, and parents, and an adaptive approach in response to policy changes and societal dynamics. However, this optimization has not yet reached its full potential due to limitations such as insufficient facilities, the absence of a dedicated digital media management team, and inconsistent content posting schedules, all of which affect the effectiveness of branding. Therefore, it is recommended that the school establish an internal digital marketing team, conduct training on content and social media management, and strengthen supporting infrastructure to ensure the sustainability of its digital strategy. Furthermore, future research could examine the impact of digital branding on public perception and prospective student interest or conduct comparative studies across educational institutions to provide a broader understanding of the effectiveness of branding strategies in the digital era.

Acknowledgements

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