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Enhancing the Competitiveness of Islamic Elementary Schools through Service Differentiation and School Image Modernization

Maya Diaz Restarie*, R Madhakomala, Siti Zulaikha, Syafa'at Ariful Huda

Education Management, Faculty of Education, State University of Jakarta, East Jakarta, 13220, Indonesia

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* Corresponding author:

E-mail: maya.diaz@mhs.unj.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the direction and trends of research on service differentiation and school image as a competitiveness strategy for Islamic elementary schools in the modern education era. The study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) using the PRISMA method, drawing data from Scopus and Google Scholar within the 2020–2025 range. A total of 98 articles were identified based on relevant keywords. After a systematic selection process and screening using inclusion–exclusion criteria, 29 articles were considered eligible for deeper analysis. The findings indicate that recent research trends focus on the synergy between service quality, school image, and digital transformation as the main pillars of competitiveness among Islamic educational institutions. Cluster analysis revealed four dominant themes: school image and reputation, service quality and competitive advantage, digital branding strategies, and the local context of Islamic schools in Indonesia. This study demonstrates that the success of Islamic elementary schools in the modern era is determined not only by religious values but also by institutional capability in managing services, building digital reputation, and developing public trust strategically.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Islamic elementary schools in Indonesia have undergone rapid expansion, driven by a growing public preference for religiously grounded education that remains relevant to contemporary societal demands. This development is particularly evident in the increasing number of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDIT) and private Islamic schools in metropolitan areas such as Jakarta, where competition is no longer limited to academic achievement but also extends to building a credible image and public reputation. In this competitive landscape, service differentiation and school image have emerged as two strategic pillars that determine the competitive strength of Islamic educational institutions

(Abadi & Hidayatulloh, 2022; Rosi, 2022; Hamzah, 2023). The orientation of urban families has shifted from merely seeking religious values to expecting professionalism and high-quality services, compelling Islamic schools to adjust to a more market-driven modernization of education.

The digital transformation of education has further accelerated this shift, pushing Islamic schools to transition from traditional management to a service-oriented institutional approach emphasizing customer satisfaction, service excellence, and digital reputation (Omirezak, 2021; Azevedo, 2022). This transition is not limited to classroom technology but has extended to managerial processes, public communication, and institutional branding. Islamic schools today are expected not only to excel academically and religiously, but also to demonstrate adaptability to Education 4.0 and Society 5.0 standards, where the synergy between human and digital capabilities forms an essential source of competitive advantage (Kurniawan, 2024; Wahyunto, 2024). As a result, school competitiveness is increasingly determined by institutional ability to integrate service quality and credible school image into sustained strategic management.

Conceptually, service differentiation refers to an institution's ability to establish distinctiveness through services that meet or surpass stakeholder expectations, particularly those of parents and learners (Rosi, 2022; Diana, 2023; Syahrial, 2025). Meanwhile, school image functions as symbolic capital shaping public perception and confidence toward the institution (Abadi & Hidayatulloh, 2022; Aziz & In'am, 2024). The interaction between these two dimensions generates strategic added value that enables Islamic schools to compete with both religious and non-religious institutions in terms of credibility, trust, and social attractiveness. Thus, understanding how these factors work together becomes essential to strengthening the relevance and sustainability of Islamic schools in an increasingly quality-driven education market.

Empirical research also highlights the importance of the synergy between services and school image in reinforcing school competitiveness. Hamzah (2023) discovered that word-of-mouth acts as a crucial mediator between service quality and parents' decisions to choose Islamic schools. Similarly, Al As'adie & Hasanah (2024) emphasized that competitive advantage in Islamic education is no longer tied solely to religious values, but to the strategic transformation of service innovation, visionary leadership, and digital technology. Reinforcing this pattern, Mulyani (2025) found that both digital reputation and institutional quality significantly shape parents' school-choice decisions, signifying a shift from "faith-based preference" to "quality-based consideration."

In today's context, digital branding has become a defining strategy for Islamic educational institutions in enhancing their competitive standing. Through social media platforms, institutional websites, and content-based campaigns, schools construct a modern narrative of reputation that combines religious identity with professionalism and innovation (Munawwaroh, 2024; Rafsanjani et al., 2024). Azevedo (2022) highlighted that digital technologies function as catalysts for social

interaction and public trust in educational institutions, while in Indonesia, digital branding simultaneously becomes a medium for projecting Islamic values in a progressive manner merging religiosity with modernity, competence, and service innovation (Kurniawan, 2024; Ikhwan, 2025).

Although numerous studies have acknowledged the relationship between service quality and school image in generating school competitiveness, most remain conceptual or case-based and do not provide a comprehensive synthesis of research directions within the Indonesian Islamic school context. A research gap therefore exists in understanding how service and image interact amid digital disruption and shifting social dynamics. International literature, such as Borkes (2020) and Omirzak (2021), explores technology and education but rarely integrates religious values into a service-based competitive framework. This gap underscores the necessity for a systematic review capable of mapping collective evidence and identifying contemporary research pathways related to competitiveness strategies in Islamic schools.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of educational management, service marketing, and digital transformation into a unified conceptual model. Rather than examining service differentiation and school image separately, this study synthesizes global and national research trends to identify collaborative interactions among service quality, institutional reputation, and digitalization as key determinants of competitiveness in Islamic schools. Consistent with the findings of this review, competitive strategies in Islamic elementary schools are most effective when program innovation is executed in parallel with strong institutional reputation building (Putra & Maryani, 2024). The findings provide practical implications for school managers in formulating branding and service strategies aligned with the dynamics of today's educational marketplace (Rachman, 2025; Hepriyanti, 2024).

Accordingly, the study addresses four main research questions: (1) What are the trends and research directions on service differentiation and school image in Islamic elementary schools in the modern education era from 2020 to 2025? (2) How does service quality contribute to strengthening school competitiveness? (3) How does school image reinforce parental trust and loyalty? and (4) How is digital branding implemented to enhance school reputation and competitive advantage? Beyond answering these questions, this review aspires to propose a conceptual model explaining the synergy among service quality, school image, and digitalization as a strategic foundation for Islamic school competitiveness.

2. Methodology

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) designed in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol to ensure that the literature screening process was systematic, transparent, and replicable. This approach was selected because it enables the integration of empirical and conceptual findings on service differentiation and

school image as competitiveness strategies for Islamic elementary schools in the modern education era. The review procedure followed four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion consistent with PRISMA standards. Each step was carried out using the principle of traceability, whereby all examined documents were tracked based on source, year of publication, and relevance to the research focus.

Data analysis adopted a combination of descriptive–thematic review and bibliometric techniques. VOSviewer software was used to identify co-occurrence patterns among keywords and to map thematic clusters reflected in the selected publications. This strategy made it possible to explore conceptual developments within the specified timeframe and uncover relationships between constructs such as brand image, service quality, competitive advantage, and digital branding in the context of Islamic schools. The outputs of bibliometric mapping were subsequently interpreted qualitatively to generate an analytical synthesis of research trends and theoretical trajectories. By combining quantitative bibliometric mapping and qualitative interpretive review, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the scholarly dynamics shaping the conceptual model of service differentiation and school image as a competitiveness strategy for Islamic elementary schools in the modern era.

3. Results and Discussion

To ensure that the review process was rigorous and unbiased, all stages of the literature screening adhered to the PRISMA workflow, beginning from identification to final inclusion. Articles retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar were examined step-by-step based on topic relevance, full-text availability, publication type, and suitability to the study’s focus on service differentiation and school image as a competitiveness strategy for Islamic elementary schools in the modern education era. Title and abstract screening served as the first filtering layer, followed by full-text assessment to validate theoretical and empirical alignment with the research variables. Each phase of the process was carefully documented to maintain accountability and replicability within the SLR procedure, as summarized in Figure 1.

At the identification stage, 98 peer-reviewed publications from 2020–2025 were collected. Scopus yielded 34 articles. Complementary searches in Google Scholar produced 38 relevant publications. Manual screening also identified 20 additional sources from academic proceedings and book chapters not fully indexed. After Mendeley compilation and duplicate checking, the dataset remained 98 unique publications. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure that only studies aligned with the research focus and methodological standards were incorporated into the final synthesis, as summarized in Table 1.

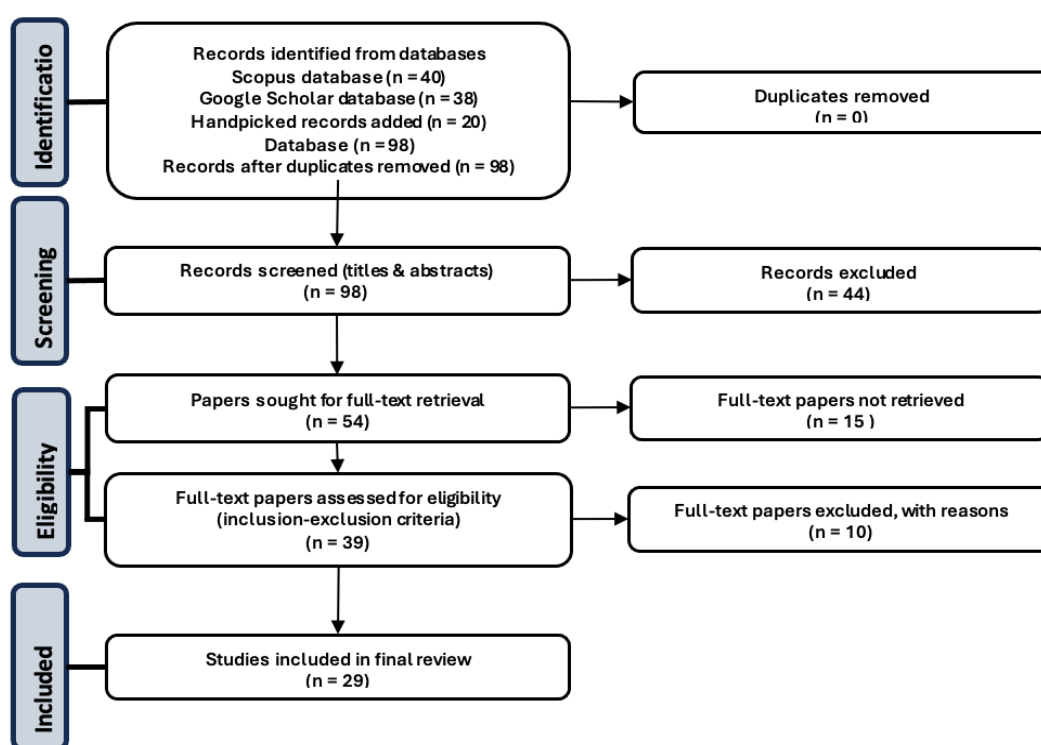


Figure 1. PRISMA Chart

Table 1. Table of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Type of Document	Journal articles, scientific proceedings, academic book chapters	Theses/dissertations, project reports, blogs, news, non-scientific content
Document Accessibility	Full-text available	Full-text unavailable
Topic Relevance	Focus on service differentiation, school image, digital branding, school competitiveness, or a combination of these variables	Does not discuss Islamic education or is irrelevant to services/image of schools
Language Research Subjects	English–Indonesian Islamic educational institutions, especially Islamic Elementary Schools / SDIT	Other than English–Indonesian Non-Islamic institutions or non-school settings (e.g., general universities, non-Islamic kindergartens, companies)
Variable Relationships	Explains the relationship among services, school image, digital branding, and/or competitiveness	Does not relate variables or stands independently without theoretical direction
Contribution to Research	Produces empirical findings or conceptual contributions that support the SLR synthesis	Merely descriptive without theoretical/empirical contribution to the research theme

During title–abstract screening, 44 articles were excluded because they did not match the thematic scope of Islamic school competitiveness. The remaining 54 studies were subjected to eligibility assessment, where only those meeting the following criteria were retained: (a) written in Indonesian or English; (b) accessible

in full-text; (c) classified as journal articles, conference proceedings, or scholarly book chapters; and (d) theoretically or empirically linked to Islamic school competitiveness through service quality and/or school image. The final inclusion resulted in 29 articles representing the most relevant evidence base for synthesis.

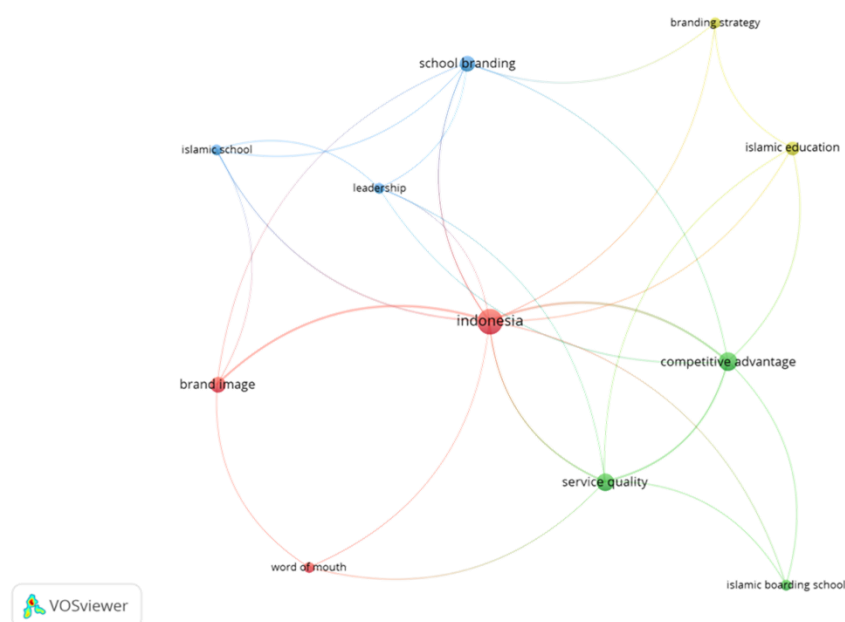


Figure 2. The Bibliometric Mapping

The bibliometric and thematic mapping generated four major research clusters that characterize the scientific landscape related to service differentiation and school image within Islamic elementary schools. These clusters reflect the dominant direction of research development during 2020–2025 and highlight the interconnectedness between institutional reputation, service quality, and digital transformation in the formation of school competitiveness.

The first cluster groups keywords such as brand image, school branding, and word of mouth, illustrating a strong research emphasis on building institutional credibility and public trust. Studies by Hamzah (2023) and Abadi & Hidayatulloh (2022) demonstrate that school image is not merely an identity label, but a strategic mechanism for shaping public perception of educational quality in Islamic institutions. A strong image increases trust capital, strengthens parent loyalty, and enhances differentiation in increasingly competitive educational markets (Aziz & In'am, 2024; Rachman, 2025; Hepriyanti, 2024).

The second cluster links service quality, competitive advantage, leadership, and Islamic boarding school, highlighting the role of service management in institutional competitiveness. Evidence across studies (Rosi, 2022; Diana, 2023; Al As'adie & Hasanah, 2024) shows that differentiated services rooted in empathy, responsiveness, and consistent value delivery have become determinants of school

preference among urban families. In both SDIT and pesantren settings, service quality functions as a sustainability indicator, reflecting professionalism and alignment with parental expectations (Syahrial, 2025; Kartiko & Rohmania, 2025).

The third cluster dominated by branding strategy, Islamic education, and digital era indicates that digitalization has reshaped how Islamic schools communicate with the public and maintain visibility. Munawwaroh (2024) and Rafsanjani *et al.* (2024) provide evidence that digital promotional tools, particularly social media campaigns and paid promotion, substantially reinforce school reputation. This is consistent with global perspectives from Azevedo (2022) and Omirzak (2021), which emphasize the growing role of technology networks and digital interaction in strengthening public confidence in educational institutions.

The fourth cluster highlights the contextual dominance of Indonesia as a geographical research base, where Indonesia, Islamic school, and competitive advantage appear consistently. This trend correlates with the rapid growth of Islamic elementary schools in urban regions such as Jakarta, prompting institutions to adopt strategic repositioning, program innovation, and brand-based differentiation to attract students and strengthen parent loyalty (Kurniawan, 2024; Ikhwan, 2025; Noor, 2022). A modern–religious school image is increasingly recognized as symbolic capital influencing parents' enrolment decisions (Mulyani, 2025; Halima, 2023; Rokhman *et al.*, 2023).

The extraction of variables across the 29 selected studies reveals a consistent pattern in how competitiveness in Islamic elementary schools is conceptualized. Service differentiation is generally reflected in indicators such as service quality, program innovation, parental satisfaction, and the effectiveness of learning processes, while school image is operationalized through academic reputation, institutional achievements, the credibility of educators, the effectiveness of public communication, and parental trust. School competitiveness, meanwhile, is represented by increased enrolment interest, competitive positioning, social attractiveness, and long-term parental loyalty. Recent publications also introduce a derivative construct, referred to as the “quality operational program,” which acts as a mediating element determining whether differentiated services are experienced consistently and credibly enough to strengthen school image. Collectively, these patterns indicate that institutional competitiveness in Islamic elementary schools is increasingly understood as the outcome of the integrated management of service delivery, public perception, and operational performance of flagship programs.

Overall, the findings of this review illustrate a clear research trajectory in the 2020–2025 period, showing a progressive shift in the competitiveness paradigm of Islamic elementary schools. Rather than relying primarily on religious identity as the basis of institutional appeal, recent studies emphasize that schools must demonstrate measurable service excellence, reputational credibility, and digital visibility to remain competitive in the modern education landscape. The growing intensity of competition particularly among Islamic elementary schools in urban

regions encourages institutions to adopt more systematic strategies to differentiate their services and build sustainable trust among parents

Taken together, the findings provide converging evidence that competitiveness in Islamic elementary schools is not shaped by a single variable, but by the synergistic interaction between service delivery, institutional reputation, and digital engagement, strengthened by the operational integrity of flagship programs. This synergy forms the conceptual foundation of what recent literature refers to as service-based branding in Islamic education an emerging model in which public trust becomes the core logic of school management and the determining factor of long-term institutional sustainability.

The results of this review demonstrate that competitiveness among Islamic elementary schools in the modern education era is increasingly shaped by the quality of service delivery and the strength of institutional image. In contrast to earlier assumptions that religious identity alone is sufficient to secure public interest, contemporary patterns indicate that parents evaluate Islamic schools using criteria similar to those applied to secular private schools including professionalism, responsiveness, program excellence, and digital visibility. This shift aligns with the evolving expectations of urban Muslim families who seek religious environments without compromising learning effectiveness, student experience, and institutional credibility. In this context, competitiveness becomes a multidimensional construct in which both functional and symbolic attributes work simultaneously to influence parental decision-making. Recent findings also highlight that service quality does not only shape parental perceptions but directly reinforces parental loyalty when satisfaction is consistently achieved (Rahmawati & Kurniasari, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the argument that service differentiation acts as the earliest catalyst of school competitiveness. Consistent delivery of high-quality services from administrative responsiveness to instructional performance and student support produces positive user experience, which later triggers informal marketing mechanisms such as word-of-mouth and online testimonials. Meanwhile, school image amplifies these effects by shaping how the public interprets institutional identity and values. When an institution is widely perceived as credible, modern, and trustworthy, parental loyalty becomes more stable and less dependent on short-term promotional tactics. This pattern is aligned with international research showing that digital branding has become a strategic instrument for strengthening parental trust in faith-based schools, especially in the post-pandemic era (Farooq & Siddiqui, 2022). This configuration confirms that service quality and school image are not independent variables; rather, they form an interdependent cycle that continuously reinforces institutional reputation.

The review also highlights the central impact of digital branding in the contemporary education landscape. As families increasingly rely on digital platforms to compare schools, evaluate programs, and track institutional achievements, the online presence of Islamic schools has become a significant

determinant of public trust. This study supports recent research arguing that digital branding, especially through strategic use of social media and content-based promotion, shapes visibility and influences enrollment behavior. However, the literature further indicates that digital campaigns only contribute meaningfully when they are grounded in authentic institutional performance. Schools that project an attractive image online but fail to deliver consistent services offline tend to experience credibility decline, whereas those with strong operational capacity maximize digital media as a tool for reinforcing rather than fabricating their reputation.

A significant contribution of recent studies is the emergence of quality operational program as a mediating construct connecting service differentiation to institutional reputation. While innovative programs — such as Qur'an memorization, extracurricular talent development, and character-based activities — are widely implemented in Islamic schools, the literature emphasizes that innovation alone does not guarantee increased competitiveness. What matters is how these programs are executed. Schools that maintain stable routines, allocate competent personnel, provide clear communication to parents, and evaluate program outcomes tend to build stronger trust capital and digital engagement. In contrast, schools with inconsistent program execution are less successful in translating service differentiation into competitiveness. This reinforces the proposition that operational integrity serves as the critical mechanism converting innovation into meaningful parental value.

However, it is important to note that most of these identified trends reflect the context of schools in metropolitan areas, where market demand and resource availability for digital implementation and professionalization of services tend to be high. These resource-intensive strategies may not be easily applied equally to traditional Islamic elementary schools or in areas with limited resources. For Islamic elementary schools in non-urban areas, competitiveness may be more determined by community engagement, the quality of teachers as religious authority figures, or affordability, which are distinct service differentiation factors not fully addressed in this market-oriented research cluster. Service differentiation in resource-limited contexts needs to center on in-depth personalization and local values, rather than simply standardizing formal services.

Beyond contextual issues, the strong emphasis on image modernization also poses a significant risk: the degradation of Islamic values. The shift from "faith-based preferences" to "quality-based considerations" has the potential to encourage schools to prioritize attractive branding especially digitally over the substance of character education and Islamic values. A sustainable competitiveness model must ensure that the modern image projected does not obscure Islamic identity, but rather integrates these values into service differentiation (e.g., service empathy as a manifestation of morality). Therefore, the consistency of quality operational programs is crucial, serving as a mechanism to maintain Islamic integrity while maintaining service excellence, ensuring that schools maximize digital media as a tool to strengthen an authentic reputation, rather than fabricate a false image.

Thus, these findings provide converging evidence that competitiveness in Islamic elementary schools is shaped not by a single variable, but by a synergistic interaction between service delivery, institutional reputation, and digital engagement, reinforced by the operational integrity of flagship programs. This synergy forms the conceptual foundation of what recent literature has termed service-based branding in Islamic education, a model that positions public trust as the core logic of school management and a determinant of long-term institutional sustainability.

Taken together, the evidence across studies supports the formation of a service-based branding model in Islamic education. Under this model, schools are expected not only to deliver distinctive services and cultivate symbolic identity, but also to manage institutional performance in a way that is transparent, measurable, and communicable to the public. The central logic of competitiveness therefore shifts toward trust capital, in which public confidence built from lived service experience, reinforced through communication, and amplified through digital visibility becomes the most important intangible asset of Islamic schools. This conceptual shift carries important implications for school governance, encouraging institutions to adopt holistic management that prioritizes educational quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and digital public engagement simultaneously.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that the competitiveness of Islamic elementary schools in the modern education era is built upon the integration of service differentiation, school image, digital branding, and the operational consistency of flagship programs. High-quality service delivery enhances parental experience and stimulates word-of-mouth, while a strong school image strengthens trust and loyalty through credible institutional identity. Digital branding amplifies these strengths by expanding public visibility and reinforcing positive perceptions. The review further highlights the emerging role of the quality operational program as the mechanism that determines whether differentiated services are successfully translated into reputation and long-term competitiveness, forming the foundation of a contemporary service-based branding model in Islamic education.

Based on these conclusions, Islamic elementary schools are encouraged to prioritize continuous improvement in service quality, maintain consistent implementation of flagship programs, and adopt proactive digital branding strategies to strengthen institutional visibility and trust. Schools should incorporate measurable performance indicators, transparent communication with parents, and professional management practices to sustain credibility. For future research, empirical testing using SEM/PLS is recommended to verify the causal relationship among service differentiation, school image, operational program quality, and competitiveness, while qualitative case studies may explore best practices in schools with proven success in these areas. Expanding research to broader educational contexts such as

madrasahs and Islamic secondary schools may further validate the applicability of the service-based branding model across multiple Islamic education settings.

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