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Innovative Leadership of The Principal in Digital Transformation and School Branding at SMAU CT Arsa Foundation Sukoharjo

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A B S T R A C T

Digital transformation and increasing competition in institutional image require school principals to demonstrate innovative leadership capable of integrating technology, school culture, and public trust. This study aims to describe the innovative leadership practices of principals in implementing digital transformation and school branding at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation Sukoharjo, a nonprofit boarding school serving students from underprivileged families. This research employed a qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that innovative leadership is institutionalized through three main systems: (1) leadership grounded in discipline, role modeling, and school culture; (2) sustainable digital transformation oriented toward digital equity, pedagogical risk management, and digital regulation integrated with boarding school discipline; and (3) performance based school branding as an implication of successful institution building. These findings confirm that the influence of innovative leadership on school quality and reputation operates indirectly through the strengthening of organizational culture and systems. This study contributes to the field of educational leadership by demonstrating that the integration of innovative leadership, equitable digital transformation, and performance based branding constitutes an effective strategy for the sustainability of nonprofit boarding schools.

1. Introduction

Digitalization has become a necessity for schools to provide learning services aligned with 21st-century competencies. UNESCO, through the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report (2024), emphasizes that leadership is the second most influential factor after teachers in determining learning outcomes. This indicates

that the success of Indonesia's educational digital transformation agenda heavily depends on the effectiveness of leadership at all educational levels. In Indonesia, this agenda is implemented through the 2025 Learning Digitalization Program launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), targeting the distribution of digital devices such as Interactive Flat Panels (IFPs) and laptops to 288,865 schools.

According to the Kemendikbud (2025) report, as of October 22, 2025, a total of 64,072 devices had been distributed and were ready for use. However, comprehensive digitalization covering learning processes, data management, and administrative systems has been implemented in only about one-third of schools, reflecting a digital readiness gap influenced by teacher competence, school culture, and leadership capacity (Kemendikbud, 2025). In line with this, Purba (2025) demonstrates that principal leadership indirectly affects educational quality through the mediating roles of organizational culture and teacher work motivation. Organizational culture plays a crucial role in bridging the influence of leadership on educational quality. Nuraini et al. (2025) emphasizes that the synergy between leadership, teacher competence, and school work culture is a key factor in improving learning outcomes. In the context of digitalization, an adaptive organizational culture becomes a prerequisite for technological innovation to be accepted and internalized by all school members.

Under conditions of unequal digital readiness, innovative leadership becomes increasingly relevant. Innovative leadership requires principals to design strategic breakthroughs, make adaptive decisions, create flexible learning environments, and encourage active participation among school stakeholders. Empirical evidence from Sari and Putra (2023) indicates that innovative leadership contributes to improving the effectiveness of technology-based learning and strengthening a collaborative work culture. Furthermore, Rasdiana et al. (2024) report that principals' digital leadership plays a vital role in fostering teachers' innovation skills through the mediating mechanism of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). This finding aligns with Darmawati, Yanti, and Iskandar (2024), who emphasize that digital transformation in schools cannot rely solely on technological infrastructure but is highly dependent on principals' managerial capacity to prepare teachers, ensure effective implementation, and sustain innovation.

Moreover, Mulyadi et al. (2023) position principals as key change agents who align organizational culture, teacher commitment, and institutional goals to reduce resistance to change and enable schools to respond more effectively to systemic transformation. Nevertheless, disparities in digital readiness among schools cannot be explained solely by infrastructural limitations. Ridwan Abdullah et al. (2026) emphasize that an innovative school culture and digital leadership play a central role in shaping teachers' digital competencies and supporting technology integration. Without strong cultural and leadership support, technology integration tends to be hindered by a lack of collaboration and organizational adaptability. Conversely, strong digital leadership enables better alignment of technology with instructional needs, enhancement of teacher competence, and reinforcement of an innovative school culture.

Alongside digital transformation, school branding has emerged as a strategic issue amid increasing competition among educational institutions. Parents no longer consider academic achievement alone but also institutional image, character, and identity when selecting schools for their children. A study by Mahbub (2023) at SDIT Zaid bin Tsabit found that school image contributed approximately 63% to parental decision-making. This indicates that school branding represents not merely promotional activities but also the quality of educational services and institutional culture shaped through leadership and policy. Additional empirical evidence suggests that transformational leadership supported by effective information system management strengthens organizational commitment, teacher professionalism, and administrative efficiency (Faizah & Herawati, 2025). Although Purba (2025) and Rasdiana et al. (2024) have highlighted the mediating roles of organizational culture and PLCs, comprehensive studies linking innovative leadership, digital transformation, and school branding remain limited.

Research on innovative leadership in education has generally focused on leadership characteristics and their contribution to institutional quality. Fitrah et al. (2021) define innovative leadership as the ability to develop human resources, build organizational culture, and promote adaptive change. However, much of the existing research remains fragmented, addressing either digital transformation or school branding separately, and is predominantly conducted in regular schools with relatively adequate resources. From a sustainability perspective, Jannah et al. (2025) reveal that improving education quality sustainably requires the integration of strategic management with continuous quality assurance and evaluation, as well as the role of school leadership as the main driving force. This perspective aligns with Christine and Raharja (2025), who argue that quality management principles must be integrated into school culture and practices to ensure sustainable improvements in educational quality.

SMAU CT ARSA Foundation represents a relevant case within this context. Established in 2018 under the CT ARSA Foundation, this nonprofit boarding school serves students from underprivileged families. Despite limitations in funding and human resources, the school has successfully implemented digital innovations, including computer-based testing (CBT), provision of laptops for all students, a digital library, and a learning management system (LMS), implemented gradually and sustainably. Gymnastiar et. al (2023) indicate that the boarding school system provides a controlled and structured learning environment, enabling students to focus on academic learning while simultaneously developing social skills and leadership character through organized extracurricular activities.

From a branding perspective, the school has demonstrated significant growth, with the number of applicants reaching 2,740 for an annual capacity of 200 students. Public interest is driven by student achievement, a disciplined boarding school culture, integration of Islamic values, and national recognition as a pilot “Sekolah Rakyat” (People’s School). To date, no study has simultaneously examined the interrelationship between innovative leadership, digital transformation, and school branding within the context of a nonprofit boarding school. Therefore, this study aims to describe the innovative leadership practices of the principal in

implementing digital transformation and strengthening school branding at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation Sukoharjo.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative field research approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of innovative leadership practices in driving digital transformation and strengthening school branding at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation Sukoharjo. Field research was selected to generate non-numerical descriptive data through direct engagement with the research context, enabling the researcher to observe, interact with, and interpret social processes as they naturally occurred within the school environment. The primary subject of this study was the school principal, who served as the central actor in the formulation, implementation, and sustainability of innovative leadership, digital transformation initiatives, and institutional branding strategies. To enrich and triangulate the data, teachers, educational staff, and relevant school personnel were involved as supporting informants. Primary data were collected directly from the research site to ensure the accuracy and richness of the findings. In addition, this study was supported by secondary data sources, including school documents and archives, administrative records, policy documents, meeting minutes, books, scientific journals, and other relevant written materials related to innovative leadership, school digital transformation, and branding strategies.

Data collection techniques included observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to examine school activities, leadership practices, and digital transformation processes directly, utilizing the researcher's senses and supporting research instruments. In-depth interviews were carried out as a communicative process aimed at obtaining comprehensive and reflective insights, in which the researcher acted as the interviewer and the informants provided responses based on their experiences and perspectives. Documentation techniques were used to analyze various written and visual materials, such as school archives, photographs of learning activities, and institutional support programs at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation Sukoharjo. Data analysis followed an interactive analysis model, encompassing the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation of sources, methods, and time. Throughout the research process, ethical principles were upheld by maintaining objectivity, confidentiality, and obtaining informed consent from all participants. This methodological approach was expected to generate a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of innovative school leadership, sustainable digital transformation, and school branding development within a nonprofit boarding school context.

3. Results and Discussion

SMAU CT ARSA Foundation Sukoharjo is a nonprofit boarding senior high school established in 2018 in Sukoharjo under the auspices of the CT ARSA Foundation

(Choirul Tanjung & Anita Ragnasari). The school has a strategic mission to break the cycle of poverty by providing high-quality education for students from underprivileged families, with all educational costs fully covered by the foundation. The boarding school system integrates academic learning with character development, religious values, discipline, and leadership within a structured learning environment. Despite limitations in financial and human resources as a nonprofit institution, SMAU CT ARSA Foundation demonstrates strong institutional performance and a high level of public trust. This is reflected in its annual intake capacity of 200 students, which consistently attracts more than 2,000 applicants each year, reaching 2,740 applicants in the previous year. In terms of infrastructure, the school has gradually developed a digital ecosystem through a one-student-one-laptop policy, the implementation of a Learning Management System (LMS), a digital library, and the use of Computer-Based Testing (CBT) to support learning quality, administrative efficiency, and the strengthening of school branding.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design to examine the practices of innovative school leadership in the context of digital transformation and school branding enhancement. The principal, who has led the school since its establishment, serves as the primary research subject, supported by informants including vice principals, teachers, administrative staff, and boarding supervisors. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation of daily school activities (such as morning assemblies and disciplinary practices), and analysis of institutional documents and school management systems. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving data reduction, category development, and interpretation to identify patterns linking innovative leadership, digital transformation, and branding in a nonprofit boarding school context. The interview question guidelines are shown in the table 1 below.

Table 1. List of Research Interview Questions

No.	Dimension	Interview Questions
1	Leadership Vision	How do you define innovative leadership in the context of a nonprofit boarding school?
2	Strategic Direction	What strategic considerations underlie the school's decision to implement digital transformation?
3	Decision-Making	How do you make decisions regarding the adoption of digital technologies in learning and administration?
4	Organizational Culture	How do you cultivate a school culture that supports innovation and digital adaptation?
5	Teacher Readiness	What strategies are used to prepare teachers for digital-based learning and innovation?
6	Professional Learning	How are Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) utilized to support digital innovation?
7	Challenges	What major challenges have you encountered in implementing digital transformation, and how were they addressed?
8	Sustainability	How do you ensure the sustainability of digital innovation despite limited resources?
9	Branding Strategy	How does digital transformation contribute to strengthening the school's branding and public image?

10	Boarding School Context	How does the boarding school system influence leadership practices and innovation processes?
11	Impact Perception	What changes have you observed in learning quality, teacher performance, and institutional reputation?
12	Future Direction	What are the future plans for digital development and branding at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation?

Innovative Leadership System at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation

Findings from interviews and field observations indicate that the principal's leadership at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation has served as the primary driver of systemic change since the school's establishment. The principal emphasized that his core mandate is "to bring into existence what previously did not exist" within the context of a nonprofit boarding school operating under resource constraints. The foundation's vision of breaking the cycle of poverty through quality education is translated into strategic policies. These policies integrate academic strengthening, character development, cultivation of faith and piety, human resource development, and the structuring of the school environment.

These findings demonstrate that innovative leadership is not centered solely on technological adoption, but rather on the development of adaptive and efficient institutional systems. Innovation is perceived as a strategic necessity to ensure institutional sustainability, aligning with UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report (2024), which emphasizes the crucial role of leadership in safeguarding learning quality, particularly in resource-limited educational institutions. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal several challenges, including differing levels of readiness among school members in responding to change particularly between senior and younger teachers as well as financial constraints that limit the pace and scale of innovation. These conditions suggest that the effectiveness of innovative leadership is highly dependent on the strength of the principal's leadership and the support of the foundation, which may constrain its replicability across different school contexts.

Within this context, innovative leadership is reflected not only in the principal's personal leadership style, but also in the establishment of school systems that sustain educational quality over time. This finding is consistent with Purba (2025), who argues that principal leadership influences educational quality indirectly through the strengthening of school culture and the enhancement of teachers' capacity and work motivation. Based on the research findings, innovative leadership at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation is institutionalized through several interrelated school systems, as described below.

a.Discipline- and Role-Modeling Based Leadership System

The principal positions discipline and role modeling as the primary pillars of character formation among school members through collectively enforced, non-negotiable norms. Core practices include mandatory daily morning assemblies, active participation in congregational worship, and mastery of basic religious competencies, including the ability to lead prayers. The principal firmly stated,

"Every morning students must attend the assembly. I cannot compromise with anyone or anything," as a strategy to cultivate a culture of cleanliness, orderliness, and punctuality in classroom attendance.

Role modeling is manifested through consistent daily practices, including arriving at school earlier and leaving later than others, leading Qur'anic recitation and congregational prayers, standing during meetings and teaching sessions, actively participating in tree-planting and litter collection alongside students, and conducting direct academic supervision by reviewing both the substance and technical aspects of teachers' examination questions to ensure that cognitive demands reach higher-order thinking levels (C5: analysis evaluation). The principle articulated by the principal "A thousand pieces of advice are defeated by a single example" has shaped collective habits that internalize values of religiosity, responsibility, and compliance, while simultaneously strengthening public trust (social trust) in the school's educational quality despite its nonprofit status.

The main challenges in implementing discipline and role modeling relate to student seniority dynamics, particularly within student organizations and boarding school life. Senior junior relations have the potential to create informal hierarchies which, if not closely monitored, may shift from mentoring functions toward symbolic domination. This condition requires direct intervention from the principal and boarding supervisors to ensure that role modeling is understood as a moral responsibility rather than a legitimization of seniority-based authority. Additionally, limitations in human resources and the extensive campus area make the enforcement of discipline especially environmental cleanliness highly dependent on the collective participation of students, teachers, educational staff, and the principal, without the support of dedicated personnel. The heavy reliance on the principal's personal involvement also poses sustainability risks, particularly in the event of leadership fatigue or leadership transition.

Theoretically, these findings are consistent with Long et al. (2025), who argue that instructional leadership enhances educational quality indirectly through the strengthening of organizational culture and professional capacity. In the context of SMAU CT ARSA Foundation, role modeling functions as a cultural mechanism that suppresses the misuse of informal hierarchies and reinforces compliance without reliance on material incentives, as emphasized in the concept of values-based leadership (Bush, 2018). Thus, SMAU CT ARSA Foundation demonstrates that leadership innovation not only constructs structural compliance but also manages social relational dynamics among students. The effectiveness of this model lies in the principal's ability to transform the potential risks of seniority into a space for character learning, while continuing to face challenges related to sustainability and cross-context replicability. These practices of discipline and role modeling collectively shape the school culture, stabilizing organizational behavior and supporting the sustainability of leadership innovations, thereby ensuring that educational quality is maintained even in the absence of the principal's direct presence.

b.Dualistic Decision-Making System (Top-down and Bottom-up)

Decision-making at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation operates through a dualistic mechanism, which the principal refers to as a "Top-down and Bottom-up" system. The principal exercises top-down control over the foundation's core values and normative policies, while simultaneously providing bottom-up space for teachers to innovate in instructional practices. In an interview, the principal articulated the philosophy of organizational adaptability using the following analogy: "We do not want CT ARSA to become a dinosaur that perishes because it cannot adapt. Look at the ant; it is an ancient creature that can survive anywhere. We must be like the ant, always taking one step ahead while others are still asleep." This statement underscores that innovation is understood not as sporadic change but as an organizational attitude of continuous adaptation to environmental dynamics.

However, this adaptive spirit encounters structural human resource constraints. The principal revealed that within a relatively short period, the school lost sixteen teachers who were recruited as civil servants. High staff mobility necessitated highly detailed academic supervision. This practice is not intended as an imposition of personal will, but rather as a quality assurance strategy amid ongoing personnel turnover. From a critical perspective, the principal's tendency to personally monitor technical details can be interpreted as a form of compensatory, heroic leadership that offsets instability in human resource quality. While this model effectively maintains short-term standards, it poses a risk of "Organizational Memory Loss", where innovations are disrupted because the personnel executing them frequently change.

Theoretically, these findings align with the concept of distributed leadership, which emphasizes the allocation of leadership roles according to organizational context and needs (Spillane, 2006). Furthermore, the findings support the situational leadership perspective, which asserts that leadership effectiveness depends on the leader's ability to adjust their approach to the characteristics of the organization and the school environment (Bush, 2018). Thus, this dualistic decision-making system demonstrates that innovative leadership does not necessarily imply unrestricted freedom, but rather the ability to balance the enforcement of core values with teacher involvement. This approach enables the school to remain both stable and adaptive in the face of change.

Sustainable Digital Transformation Strategy Innovation

Digital transformation at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation represents a strategic initiative to enhance educational quality equitably while ensuring the sustainability of boarding school values. In this school, digitalization is not merely the adoption of technology, but an integrated system that manages learning access, pedagogical risks, and the development of student character. Based on the research findings, digital transformation at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation has evolved as an institutional innovation oriented toward educational equity and cultural stability, manifested through several systemic components as described in the following subsections.

a.Digital Equity

The principal of SMAU CT ARSA Foundation leads digital transformation with a primary focus on equitable access (digital equity). The one student one device policy, through lending laptops until graduation, serves as an affirmative instrument to ensure that students from underprivileged backgrounds have equal digital readiness. The principal stated, "All students are lent laptops so that they have the freedom to engage in digital learning according to their schedules." In daily practice, teachers are encouraged to integrate technology into learning, share effective platforms, and design online assessments, while strict supervision mechanisms ensure that students use technology responsibly.

However, field findings reveal a contradiction between this ambitious vision and the limitations of available resources. Uneven Wi-Fi coverage is addressed through strategic implementation of structured cabling at critical points in the dormitories to ensure stable connectivity. As a nonprofit school, the principal acknowledged a significant financial burden, "Funding is a constraint". Interestingly, these limitations are offset by a digital system that creates high vertical transparency; the foundation's leadership in Jakarta can monitor everything from kitchen operational reports to students' task progress in real time. This shows that digitalization is not merely a matter of instructional efficiency, but also a tool to strengthen educational quality and management accountability, while sustaining innovation amid infrastructure and human resource constraints.

These findings align with the concept of digital equity (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010), which emphasizes fair access and meaningful engagement with technology for all learners. They also support the principle of leadership for equity, whereby leaders design policies that prioritize social justice (Shields, 2018). OECD (2020) emphasizes that affirmative policies are crucial to prevent educational disparities. Critically, the innovative leadership at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation successfully integrates technology with the school's social mission through a Frugal Innovation approach innovation under constraints which demonstrates that systemic transparency can sustain the institution even in the face of significant resource challenges. This integration indicates that the effectiveness of digital transformation in a nonprofit school depends not only on technological sophistication but also on the leader's capacity to build an ecosystem of accountability.

b.Pedagogical Risk Management System in Digital Assessment

The implementation of digital assessment through Computer-Based Testing (CBT) at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation is recognized as carrying significant pedagogical risks, particularly related to the potential for academic dishonesty. The principal emphasized that in a digital ecosystem, supervision must be exceptionally vigilant because; "Students can go anywhere in an instant [in cyberspace]. We are not restricting them, but we must regulate it, because it is a necessity." To mitigate these risks, the school leader focuses not only on software security systems but also on strengthening teachers' competencies through regular seminars and training. Leveraging the foundation's network with access to media and technology

practitioners (such as Transmedia), the school invites experts to train teachers in designing assessments based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

This transition faces real challenges, some teachers initially experienced significant difficulties adjusting to HOTS-based evaluation standards. The training aims to enable teachers to create questions that demand deep analysis and reasoning, thereby minimizing students' opportunities to cheat using search engines. This strategy ensures that teachers are not merely technology operators but also instructional designers capable of maintaining the quality of learning outcome measurement. This approach aligns with the pedagogical risk management framework outlined by the European Commission (2017), which positions teachers as key actors in managing digital learning risks through authentic assessment. These findings also support Sarrayrih and Ilyas (2013), who argue that high-quality assessment design serves as a primary defense against academic degradation in the digital era.

Critically, innovative leadership functions as a mediating force that transforms technological challenges into opportunities for enhancing teacher professionalism. Through regular seminars and exam script supervision, the principal ensures that digital transformation remains grounded in academic integrity. This system underscores that the success of digitalized assessment heavily depends on teachers' adaptive capacity to design complex evaluations assessments that cannot be instantly solved by technology without engaging critical thinking processes.

c. Digital Regulation in Boarding Context

Digital transformation at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation is implemented systemically in connection with the disciplinary governance of the boarding school. Technology use is regulated through strict character-based policies, one of which is the collection of devices (gadgets and laptops) at 9:00 PM. The principal acknowledges the significant challenge of managing students' high digital enthusiasm: "The response [from students] is extraordinary, I'm overwhelmed, but I must act wisely. I still require students to attend religious study sessions with teachers, because social media can be dangerous. We give them freedom, but it should not go off track."

This policy ensures that digitalization does not become a space of unrestricted autonomy that could degrade social interactions or the moral values of the boarding school. Findings indicate that this integration maintains a balance between technological innovation and character education; technology is positioned as a support for academic learning without disrupting daily routines such as religious practice and self-development. Innovative leadership is demonstrated through the establishment of a clear "digital corridor," where students are granted full access during school hours but are guided back into traditional disciplinary practices at night to safeguard their mental and spiritual well-being.

These findings align with the concept of sustainable technology integration (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006), which emphasizes that the sustainability of innovation

relies on the alignment of technology with institutional values and culture. From a values-based leadership perspective (Bush, 2018), the principal is responsible for ensuring that innovation remains consistent with the school's core values. Critically, the device collection policy reflects a model of "Digital Paternalism," in which the school assumes a dominant role in controlling students' digital behavior to mitigate social and pedagogical risks (Selwyn, 2016). While this regulation effectively cultivates self-discipline in the boarding context, the challenge for innovative leadership is to gradually transform this external control into digital agency. This integration underscores that the sustainability of digital transformation in the boarding environment heavily depends on the leader's ability to harmonize technological modernity with traditional discipline and the institution's established culture.

d. Functional PLC System for Innovation Sustainability

Field observations and interviews indicate that digital transformation sustainability at SMAU CT ARSA Foundation is strongly supported by a functional Professional Learning Community (PLC) embedded in the school's management system. Although not formally labeled as a PLC, this is manifested in weekly Tuesday management meetings, serving as collective reflection spaces. The principal emphasized the importance of these meetings in maintaining quality standards: "Every Tuesday we gather, that's when I straighten everything out. I directly supervise classrooms because, for me, quality is non-negotiable."

This system proved critical in addressing massive human resource turnover. In one period, the school lost sixteen teachers to government recruitment, posing significant challenges to maintaining continuity in the digital ecosystem. The high staff mobility required microscopic supervision, entailing detailed oversight of exam scripts and technical aspects of digital learning platforms, ensuring that new teachers quickly adapted to the school's digital environment. Observations during these meetings confirmed active discussions on lesson plans, digital tools, and immediate corrective feedback, demonstrating that the functional PLC acts as a knowledge transfer engine, maintaining innovation stability amidst personnel fluctuations.

This intensive supervisory practice, while addressing immediate HR challenges, aligns with the principles of collective learning in PLCs (DuFour et al., 2010). Critically, the loss of sixteen teachers in a short period presents a risk of Organizational Memory Loss, threatening the retention of technical knowledge and digital innovation culture. In this context, the principal's microscopic supervision functions as a quality compensation mechanism, ensuring that innovation persists even when execution personnel change. This approach is consistent with the Indirect Effect Model of Leadership (Purba, 2025), in which a leader's influence is mediated by organizational systems. In SMAU CT ARSA, the functional PLC demonstrates that successful digital transformation does not rely solely on technology. In nonprofit school settings, innovation sustainability largely depends on the principal's capacity to systematically transfer digital competencies to new staff (Rasdiana et al., 2024). Through this structured approach, innovation

continues despite extreme challenges in human resources, illustrating how leadership, organizational systems, and knowledge management interact to sustain digital transformation in practice.

Performance-Based School Branding as an Implication of Innovative Leadership

Field findings indicate that the branding of SMAU CT ARSA Foundation was not designed through formal promotional strategies, but rather emerged organically as a consequence of institutional performance and innovative leadership. Based on interviews with the principal, observations of institutional practices, and student admission data, the school's reputation has been constructed through publicly verifiable performance evidence rather than symbolic image communication. The principal explicitly rejected artificial branding approaches, as stated in the interview: "We cannot showcase empty slogans. What we can showcase is evidence." This statement reflects a leadership belief that positions branding as a representation of authentic institutional quality rather than a manufactured impression.

This orientation is reflected in institutional policies that prioritize service quality and organizational culture consistency, particularly through sustained investment in digital transformation. These investments include the implementation of Computer-Based Testing (CBT), a Learning Management System (LMS), and a one student–one device policy. Observational data indicate that these practices function as part of the school's daily operational system and routine learning processes, rather than as materials for external promotion. Accordingly, digitalization is embedded within the internal work culture and reinforces credibility and performance continuity across instructional and administrative activities. The impact of this performance-based approach is empirically verified through student admission data. In the most recent academic year, the number of applicants reached 2,740 candidates for a highly limited intake capacity. Even during the early registration period (October–November), applications had already exceeded one thousand. These figures serve as empirical indicators of high public trust in the institution's capacity, credibility, and innovation. Rather than functioning as marketing metrics, the data reflect social recognition generated by consistent institutional performance.

Beyond high applicant numbers, documentary evidence shows that SMAU CT ARSA Foundation ranked fourth at the provincial level in the national university entrance selection (SNBT). This academic achievement further strengthens the relationship between institutional performance and increasing public trust, as the number of applicants has consistently exceeded 2,000 candidates annually for a very limited capacity of only 200 students. Conceptually, these findings align with the notion of performance-based branding, in which educational reputation is understood as a direct reflection of internal quality, cultural consistency, and organizational behavior. Within this framework, branding is not treated as a symbolic communication strategy, but rather as an outcome of sustained institutional practices (Mahbub, 2023). Accordingly, school branding can be interpreted as a consequence of institution-building processes rather than as an

autonomous strategic objective. This perspective positions branding as a derivative process grounded in organizational substance.

The role of the principal in shaping institutional reputation operates indirectly through systemic mechanisms. Innovative leadership influences work systems, disciplinary culture, and service quality, which in turn cultivate public trust (social trust). This pattern is consistent with Hallinger and Heck's (2011) argument that school leadership primarily affects outcomes through the strengthening of organizational systems and culture, rather than through direct influence on external perceptions. Leadership impact is therefore mediated, cumulative, and internalized within institutional routines.

The branding of SMAU CT ARSA Foundation is articulated through several institutional characteristics consistently recognized by the public. These characteristics include: (1) its status as a nonprofit school with a public-value orientation, (2) a boarding school model serving students from low-income families, (3) a strongly institutionalized boarding discipline culture, and (4) the integration of Islamic values with high intellectual standards. These characteristics do not emerge independently, but are systemically constructed through leadership practices that emphasize value consistency and performance accountability. Although performance-based branding has proven effective in building public trust, the findings also reveal several important limitations and risks. First, the success of this model is highly dependent on foundation-level resource support and the principal's direct involvement. This reliance on individual leadership creates sustainability risks, particularly during leadership transitions. Without stronger mechanisms of decentralization and institutionalization, the school's reputation may be vulnerable to brand dilution when personal supervision and exemplary leadership weaken.

Second, this branding model is difficult to replicate in other school contexts, particularly public schools or non-boarding schools. The success of SMAU CT ARSA Foundation is driven not only by innovative leadership, but also by a 24 hour boarding environment that enables intensive supervision, disciplined habituation, and continuous value internalization. These structural conditions are difficult to reproduce in non-boarding settings with limited control over students' learning environments outside school hours. Third, the high academic and disciplinary demands constituting the school's distinctive advantage carry potential cognitive and psychological risks. For students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, sustained pressure may generate latent issues such as burnout or emotional fatigue. Although no overt resistance was identified in observational data, the need for long-term psychosocial support remains a critical issue for the sustainability of this model. These risks highlight the importance of maintaining a balance between academic excellence and student well-being.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the enrichment of educational branding perspectives by emphasizing that school reputation is more effectively understood as the result of strengthened systems and institutional performance, rather than as a product of communication engineering alone. While this case demonstrates that

school branding can grow authentically from performance and leadership innovation, the findings also underscore that successful replication requires organizational resources, governance structures, and cultural capacities that may not be available in other school contexts.

4. Conclusion

Findings from SMAU CT ARSA Foundation demonstrate that innovative leadership functions as the primary driver of systemic change, educational equity, and sustainable school branding. The principal implements a multidimensional leadership approach integrating discipline, role modeling, dualistic decision making, digital transformation, and values based institutional development. Digital transformation is strategically managed to ensure equitable access, pedagogical risk mitigation, and character development. Functional Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) facilitate knowledge transfer, maintaining innovation despite frequent personnel changes. School branding emerges from internal performance, consistent culture, and measurable social impact rather than symbolic promotion, reflecting alignment between leadership, institutional systems, and public trust. The integration of Islamic values and rigorous academic standards provides a distinctive institutional advantage, reinforcing ethical, spiritual, and intellectual growth simultaneously.

However, this model is context-specific. Reliance on the principal's direct supervision, nonprofit status, boarding based controlled environments, and strong foundation support limits replicability. Challenges include disparities in teacher readiness, student cognitive load, potential burnout, and risks associated with strict discipline and digital assessments. Overall, SMAU CT ARSA Foundation exemplifies a context dependent model of innovative leadership, where sustainable educational quality emerges from systemic mechanisms that institutionalize values, ensure accountability, and foster public trust. The study highlights how leadership, organizational culture, and institutional support interact to sustain continuous innovation, equity, and long-term educational excellence in resource-constrained environments.

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