Journal of Education and Teaching (JET)
Vol. 7 No. 2 2026

From Internal Excellence to Industry Trust: Strategic Branding Management for Competitive Advantage in Vocational High Schools

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Draft article history
Submitted: 04-30-2026;
Revised: 06-29-2026;
Accepted: 07-01-2026;

ABSTRACT: This study explores strategic branding management for strengthening competitive advantage in vocational high schools. Although educational branding has been widely discussed, limited studies explain how vocational schools transform internal excellence into industry trust and sustainable competitive positioning. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five school stakeholders in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, including vice principals, a head of department, and a special job placement unit coordinator. The data were analyzed using NVivo through coding, categorization, and thematic visualization. The findings reveal four interconnected dimensions of strategic branding management: strengthening internal school excellence, implementing stakeholder-based branding, managing causal factors of competitiveness, and producing visible competitive outcomes. Internal excellence is built through shared values, teacher competence, disciplined work culture, responsive leadership, curriculum alignment with DUDI, Project-Based Learning, facilities, and evaluation systems. Branding is implemented through digital media, students, alumni, industry partnerships, and community networks. Competitive advantage is reflected in alumni employability, affordable education costs, student achievement, facilities, school reputation, and industry recognition. This study contributes by reframing vocational school branding as an evidence-based strategic management process, not merely promotion.

Keywords: competitive advantage, evidence-based branding, industry trust, strategic branding management, vocational high schools.

ABSTRAK: *Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi manajemen branding strategis dalam memperkuat keunggulan bersaing sekolah menengah kejuruan. Meskipun branding pendidikan telah banyak dikaji, masih terbatas penelitian yang menjelaskan bagaimana SMK mentransformasikan keunggulan internal menjadi kepercayaan industri dan posisi bersaing yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap lima pemangku kepentingan sekolah di Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, meliputi wakil kepala sekolah, kepala program keahlian, dan koordinator bursa kerja khusus. Data dianalisis menggunakan NVivo melalui proses pengodean, kategorisasi, dan visualisasi tematik. Temuan menunjukkan empat dimensi manajemen branding strategis yang saling terkait: penguatan keunggulan internal sekolah, implementasi branding berbasis pemangku kepentingan, pengelolaan faktor penyebab keunggulan bersaing, dan bentuk nyata keunggulan bersaing. Keunggulan internal dibangun melalui nilai bersama, kompetensi guru, budaya kerja disiplin, kepemimpinan responsif, keselarasan kurikulum dengan DUDI, Project-Based Learning, fasilitas, dan sistem evaluasi. Branding dilaksanakan melalui media digital, siswa, alumni, kemitraan industri, dan jejaring komunitas. Keunggulan bersaing tampak pada keterserapan alumni, biaya pendidikan terjangkau, prestasi siswa, fasilitas, reputasi sekolah, dan pengakuan industri. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan memaknai branding SMK sebagai proses manajemen strategis berbasis bukti, bukan sekadar promosi.*

Kata kunci: *branding berbasis bukti, kepercayaan industri, keunggulan bersaing, manajemen branding strategis, sekolah menengah kejuruan.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocational high schools operate in an increasingly competitive educational environment where institutional attractiveness is no longer determined only by formal accreditation, curriculum structure, or physical facilities. Schools are now expected to demonstrate visible quality, distinctive identity, graduate employability, industry relevance, digital presence, and public trust. In this context, branding has become an important strategic instrument for educational institutions because it helps communicate institutional value, strengthen stakeholder confidence, and differentiate schools from other providers of similar educational services. Recent studies in education and management show that branding is no longer limited to promotional activities, but is increasingly understood as a strategic process involving identity formation, value articulation, stakeholder engagement, communication consistency, and long-term reputation building (Berndt & Pantelic, 2026; Chen et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2025).

The growing importance of branding in education is closely related to broader changes in educational competition, digital communication, and stakeholder expectations. Educational institutions are required to build public recognition and trust through consistent communication of their strengths, values, and outcomes. In higher education, branding principles have been shown to support student interest, engagement, and satisfaction when educators and institutions are able to identify their values, communicate them consistently, and evaluate feedback for long-term brand equity development (Berndt & Pantelic, 2026). In the school context, strategic promotion and brand image can be strengthened through integrated management of flagship programs, leadership, infrastructure, social media, alumni networks, and administrative professionalism (Mahmud et al., 2025). These findings indicate that educational branding is a multidimensional managerial practice rather than a superficial act of publicity.

This study views branding through four complementary theoretical perspectives: strategic management, resource-based view, brand equity, and stakeholder-based branding. From a strategic management perspective, branding is not merely a communication activity, but a managerial process through which an institution defines its identity, aligns internal resources, responds to environmental demands, and positions itself competitively. This perspective is relevant to vocational high schools because their competitiveness depends on the school's ability to integrate leadership, curriculum, facilities, human resources, communication, innovation, and external partnerships into a coherent institutional strategy. In this sense, branding becomes part of strategic management because it links internal quality development with external recognition and competitive positioning.

The resource-based view further explains that competitive advantage emerges when an institution is able to develop, organize, and communicate valuable and distinctive resources. In vocational high schools, these resources include teacher competence, student skills, school culture, leadership style,

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practical learning facilities, alumni networks, curriculum relevance, digital presence, and industry partnerships. Such resources become strategically meaningful when they are difficult to imitate and are recognized by stakeholders as evidence of school quality. Therefore, branding in vocational high schools should not be understood only as the publication of school activities, but as the process of transforming internal resources into visible institutional value. This view is consistent with broader strategic management literature, which emphasizes aligned capabilities, innovation, human capital, stakeholder relationships, and adaptive responses to changing environments as foundations of competitive advantage (Cañibano et al., 2025; Depoo et al., 2022; Inthasang & Pitjatturat, 2024; Marengo et al., 2022; Mcilveene, 2026).

Brand equity theory also provides an important foundation for understanding how school branding contributes to competitive advantage. Brand equity is formed when stakeholders recognize, trust, remember, and positively evaluate an institution. In educational settings, brand awareness influences students' enrollment decision-making processes because recognition, recall, perceived value, and brand familiarity help prospective students and parents reduce uncertainty when selecting educational institutions (Bohara et al., 2022). Research on brand equity in the international education industry further shows that brand trust and brand communication significantly shape customer perception and willingness to pay premium prices (Chen et al., 2023). Although vocational high schools do not operate in the same way as commercial organizations, the logic of brand equity remains relevant because parents, students, alumni, and industry partners evaluate schools based on perceived quality, trust, reputation, affordability, and graduate outcomes.

Stakeholder-based branding complements these perspectives by emphasizing that school branding is not produced by the school alone. It is co-constructed through interactions among school leaders, teachers, students, alumni, parents, industries, communities, and digital audiences. In vocational high schools, stakeholders are especially important because schools must demonstrate not only academic quality but also work readiness, technical competence, professional discipline, and employability. Industry partners validate the relevance of curriculum and graduate competence; alumni strengthen reputation through their career trajectories; students represent the school through achievement and behavior; parents contribute to public trust through recommendations; and digital platforms expand public visibility. Therefore, strategic branding in vocational high schools should be understood as a stakeholder-based process in which internal school excellence is translated into external trust.

For vocational high schools, the branding issue is more complex than in general education because competitiveness depends not only on attracting students, but also on producing graduates who are recognized by industry. Vocational education is expected to respond to technological change, labor market needs, and industry standards. Curriculum alignment with professional and industrial requirements is therefore central to competitive advantage. Syamsuddin et al. (2023), for example, demonstrate that revising vocational cyber

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security curriculum by integrating international certification standards can improve learning quality and enhance students' competitive advantage. Similarly, the development of digital artifacts and work-process-integrated learning in vocational training illustrates the importance of knowledge co-creation, practical expertise, and digital systems in strengthening vocational competence (Thiel de Gafenco et al., 2024). These studies imply that branding in vocational schools must be grounded in real institutional capability, especially curriculum relevance, teacher competence, student achievement, and industry partnership.

However, many schools still interpret branding narrowly as promotion through websites, banners, social media posts, or school slogans. Such a limited view may create visibility, but it does not necessarily produce sustainable competitive advantage. Strategic branding requires the integration of internal quality and external communication. Schools must first develop credible institutional substance before communicating it to the public. In vocational high schools, this substance is reflected in curriculum relevance, teacher upskilling, student work culture, practical learning facilities, alumni employability, industry collaboration, and consistent organizational values. Therefore, school branding should not merely inform the public about school activities; it should build trust, clarify value, communicate real quality, and create a recognizable institutional identity.

The problem becomes more urgent in vocational high schools because similar schools often offer comparable programs, facilities, and curricula. In such conditions, competitive advantage depends on how schools convert their tangible and intangible resources into a distinctive institutional position. Branding studies in business and management have emphasized that brand strategy is a long-term investment for maintaining relevance, building loyalty, and strengthening competitiveness in dynamic environments (Vukčević & Kedačić, 2025). Corporate branding is also considered a strategic resource that can sustain reputation and competitive advantage, particularly in uncertain or crisis conditions (Molate et al., 2024). From an intangible asset perspective, brand, reputation, customer loyalty, digital presence, and organizational trust form part of goodwill that contributes to sustainable market value and competitive advantage (Semenova et al., 2024). Although these studies are not situated in vocational schools, their conceptual insights are relevant because schools also depend on reputation, trust, stakeholder loyalty, and public perception.

The state of the art shows that recent educational branding studies have begun to explore school marketing management, strategic promotion, and educational competitiveness. Ikhwan et al. (2025) found that effective school marketing management involves careful branding planning, resource organization, student and parent participation, digital and face-to-face promotion, quality control, and stakeholder satisfaction. Mahmud et al. (2025) further show that the 7P marketing mix can explain how product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence collectively strengthen school brand image and public trust. Studies outside education also enrich this debate by emphasizing employer branding, brand recommendation, innovative co-branding, cyber brand

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protection, and strategic resilience (Fieiras Ceide et al., 2023; Górska-Warsewicz, 2024; Kaban & Augustinus, 2025; Plaikner et al., 2023; Zghurska et al., 2023). These works collectively suggest that branding is strongly connected to value creation, communication, differentiation, trust, innovation, and stakeholder relationships.

Despite this growing literature, several gaps remain. First, most studies on educational branding focus on higher education, Islamic schools, or general school marketing, while vocational high schools remain relatively underexplored. Second, existing studies often emphasize promotion, enrollment, or brand image, but provide limited explanation of how branding is strategically managed through leadership, curriculum alignment, organizational culture, industry collaboration, alumni networks, facilities, student achievement, and school reputation. Third, research on vocational competitiveness frequently discusses curriculum, employability, or industry certification, but rarely connects these dimensions with strategic branding management. Fourth, there is still limited qualitative evidence explaining how school actors interpret, implement, and integrate branding practices into daily school management.

Based on these gaps, this study argues that vocational high schools need a more comprehensive framework for understanding branding as an integrated strategic management practice. Branding in vocational schools should be examined not only through media visibility, but also through the interaction between school values, leadership style, teacher and student competence, industry trust, alumni contribution, facilities, affordability, community support, and public reputation. This study therefore introduces the idea that strategic branding in vocational high schools moves from internal excellence to industry trust. Internal excellence provides the substance of branding, while industry trust and stakeholder recognition validate the school's competitive position.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore strategic branding management for competitive advantage in vocational high schools. By drawing on interview data and NVivo-based qualitative analysis, this article seeks to explain how branding is implemented, what factors shape competitive advantage, and how vocational schools translate internal strengths into external reputation and industry trust. The study contributes to the literature by reframing school branding as an integrated strategic management process that links institutional identity, educational quality, industry relevance, stakeholder trust, brand equity, and competitive positioning.

METHODs

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how strategic branding management is constructed, implemented, and interpreted as a source of competitive advantage in vocational high schools. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand school actors' experiences, managerial practices, stakeholder relationships, and perceptions of branding rather than measure statistical relationships. This approach is also relevant to educational branding studies that examine how institutional identity, leadership, promotion, stakeholder trust, and school competitiveness are shaped

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through social and managerial practices (Ikhwan et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025).

The research was conducted in vocational high schools in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they were directly involved in school management, curriculum implementation, departmental identity, industry partnerships, facilities management, student development, and school branding practices. The informants consisted of five school stakeholders: a vice principal for curriculum, a school stakeholder involved in curriculum and quality improvement, a head of department, a head of the special job placement unit, and a vice principal for facilities and infrastructure. These participants were considered relevant because they had direct knowledge of how school excellence, digital promotion, alumni involvement, industry collaboration, and competitive advantage were developed in vocational school contexts.

Table 1. Research Informants

Code	Position/Role	Main Information Explored
P1	Vice Principal for Curriculum	Curriculum alignment, school culture, leadership, coordination, student achievement
P2	School stakeholder in curriculum and quality improvement	Promotion, DUDI alignment, Project-Based Learning, supervision, teacher development
P3	Head of Department	Department identity, student involvement, alumni contribution, digital promotion, student discipline
P4	Head of Special Job Placement Unit	Career preparation, soft skills, industry recruitment, alumni employability, BKK constraints
P5	Vice Principal for Facilities and Infrastructure	School tagline, media branding, community partnership, facilities, industry trust, branding evaluation

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This technique was used because it allowed the researcher to explore predetermined themes while remaining open to new information emerging from participants' experiences. The interview questions focused on school branding strategies, school excellence, curriculum relevance, leadership, communication, student and alumni involvement, industry partnerships, facilities, educational costs, student achievement, school reputation, and challenges in maintaining competitive advantage. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative branding research because they provide flexibility to investigate both institutional strategies and stakeholder interpretations (Berndt & Pantelic, 2026; Plaikner et al., 2023).

The interview data were transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed using NVivo to support systematic coding, categorization, and thematic visualization. NVivo

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was used as an analytical aid to organize data, trace coding decisions, and develop thematic maps, in line with qualitative analysis procedures that emphasize transparency, traceability, and interpretive depth (Ahmed et al., 2025; Allsop et al., 2022). The data analysis followed four stages. First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Second, initial codes were generated from meaningful statements related to school branding, leadership, curriculum alignment, digital promotion, alumni, industry partnership, facilities, school culture, student achievement, and reputation. Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes, resulting in four main categories: strategies for enhancing school excellence, implementation of branding for competitive advantage, causal factors of competitive advantage, and visible forms of vocational school competitiveness. Fourth, the themes were interpreted by comparing information across participants and connecting the findings with relevant concepts of strategic management, brand equity, stakeholder-based branding, and competitive advantage.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied triangulation across informants and themes. Information from vice principals, department-level actors, and the special job placement unit was compared to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns. Credibility was strengthened by using direct interview evidence to support thematic interpretation, while dependability was maintained through systematic coding procedures and NVivo-based documentation. Confirmability was supported by linking interpretations to participants' statements and the coding structure, so that the findings were grounded in the data rather than researcher assumptions. Ethical considerations were also observed by obtaining participants' permission before the interviews and reporting the findings using participant codes to protect confidentiality.

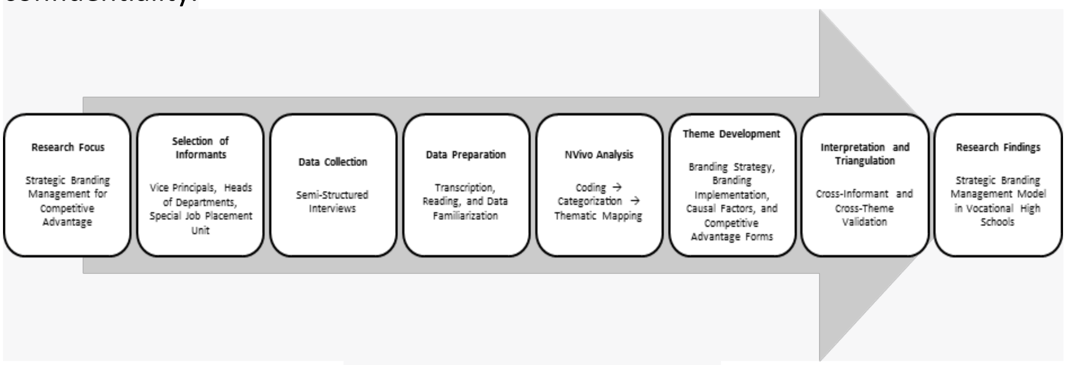

Figure 1. Research Flowchart

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The NVivo-based analysis generated four major themes explaining how strategic branding management strengthens competitive advantage in vocational high schools. These themes include: strategies for enhancing school excellence, implementation of branding for competitive advantage, causal factors of competitive advantage, and visible forms of competitive advantage in vocational

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high schools. The findings show that branding is not constructed only through promotional media, school slogans, or digital visibility. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between internal school quality, stakeholder involvement, student and alumni performance, industry trust, and public recognition.

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Findings

Main Theme	Subthemes	Main Meaning
Strategies for enhancing school excellence	Shared values, teacher competence, staff culture, strategy, structure, leadership style, and system	Branding begins with internal school quality and daily organizational practices
Implementation of branding for competitive advantage	DUDI and community partnership, students and alumni, digital media, and branding barriers	Branding is distributed across many actors and channels, not only through school promotion units
Causal factors of competitive advantage	Internal factors, external factors, and constraints	Competitive advantage is shaped by school capability, stakeholder support, and adaptive problem-solving
Competitive advantage of vocational high schools	Alumni, education costs, facilities, student achievement, and school reputation	Competitive advantage appears through employability, public trust, affordability, performance, and industry recognition

Strategy for Enhancing School Excellence

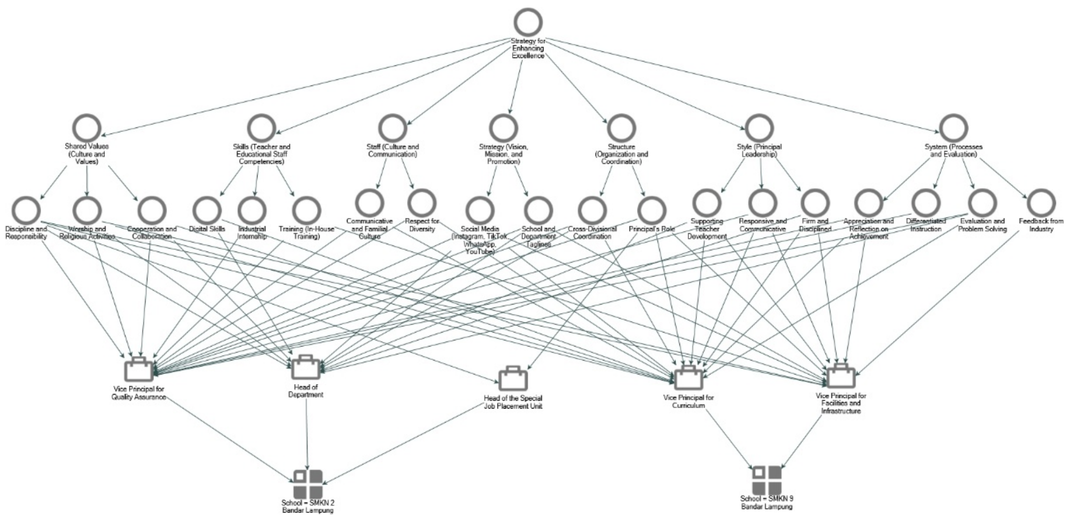

Figure 2. Strategy for Enhancing Excellence

Figure 2 shows that the strategy for enhancing school excellence consists of seven interrelated dimensions: shared values, skills, staff culture, strategy,

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Journal of Education and Teaching (JET) Volume 7 No. 2, 2026
DOI: 10.51454/jet.v7i2.969

structure, leadership style, and system. These dimensions indicate that school excellence is not produced by a single program, but by the integration of cultural, instructional, organizational, and evaluative practices. In the context of vocational high schools, internal excellence becomes the substance of branding because the school's public image is shaped by the quality of its daily practices.

The first dimension is shared values. The data show that discipline, responsibility, worship activities, cooperation, collaboration, humility, and openness are repeatedly emphasized in school routines. These values are practiced through morning discipline, student welcoming activities at the school gate, religious activities, classroom routines, and collaborative problem-solving among teachers and school leaders. One participant explained: "*Cooperation, collaboration, humility, and openness are the main values. Everything must be communicated and solved together.*" (P1)

These shared values function as the moral and behavioral foundation of the school brand. The findings indicate that branding is not only communicated through slogans, but also embodied through repeated habits, student discipline, teacher presence, and collective responsibility. In vocational schools, such values are particularly important because discipline and responsibility are closely related to work readiness.

The second dimension is skills, especially teacher and educational staff competence. Participants emphasized that vocational education must remain aligned with industrial needs. Schools strengthen teacher competence through in-house training, industry internships, digital skill development, and peer assistance among teachers. A participant stated: "*We always align the curriculum with DUDI so that what is taught is relevant to real needs in the field.*" (P2)

This statement shows that curriculum relevance is one of the strongest foundations of school excellence. The data also show that Project-Based Learning is used to help students produce concrete products, while classroom supervision is conducted to ensure that learning processes run effectively. Teacher development is not limited to administrative training, but also includes practical exposure to industry so that teachers can connect classroom learning with workplace demands.

The third dimension is staff culture and communication. Internal communication is built through direct meetings, informal coordination, and WhatsApp groups. Participants described school communication as responsive, collegial, and collaborative. Strategic issues are usually discussed through direct meetings, while urgent information is distributed through digital communication. One participant noted:

> "*Communication runs smoothly, both through WhatsApp groups and direct interaction. Important information is shared through groups, while strategic matters are discussed in meetings.*" (P1)

This finding shows that communication culture supports the speed of coordination and decision-making. Cross-unit collaboration also appears in the

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relationship between curriculum, student affairs, facilities, quality assurance, department heads, teachers, and administrative staff. Such coordination strengthens school capacity to implement programs consistently.

The fourth dimension is strategy. The schools use vision, mission, social media, school taglines, department slogans, and flagship programs as strategic instruments to build identity. Department-level branding is particularly visible through slogans such as "Menggambar peta, menggambar masa depan" in the Geomatics department and "Setiap sudut menghasilkan potensi" in the Modeling Design department. These taglines are introduced to students through school activities, morning gatherings, and department communication. One participant explained: "*We introduce the department identity gradually so that students feel a sense of belonging to their major.*" (P3)

This finding indicates that branding is also constructed at the department level. In vocational schools, each department has its own identity, expertise, and professional orientation. Therefore, department slogans help students understand the meaning of their field and strengthen their attachment to the school's vocational identity.

The fifth and sixth dimensions are structure and leadership style. The findings show that leadership is perceived as firm, responsive, communicative, and open. The principal plays an important role in directing programs, building discipline, supporting teacher development, and ensuring that information is quickly followed up. Participants described the principal as someone who responds quickly to information, gives direct direction, and does not hesitate to provide correction when needed. One participant stated:

> "*The principal is firm, quick to respond, and open. Information received by the principal is immediately forwarded to the management team so that it can be followed up.*" (P5)

This leadership style strengthens internal consistency. Branding management in vocational schools therefore depends not only on media publication, but also on leadership that maintains discipline, coordination, and quality improvement. The organizational structure supports this process by distributing responsibilities across vice principals, department heads, teachers, and supporting units.

The final dimension is system. The findings show that school excellence is maintained through appreciation, evaluation, problem-solving mechanisms, differentiated learning, data-based reflection, and feedback from industry. Students who achieve academically or non-academically are supported through transportation, accommodation, certificates, and appreciation. Teachers also receive opportunities to join training, internships, and professional development activities. These systems show that school excellence is built through continuous improvement, not only through symbolic branding.

Implementation of Branding for Competitive Advantage

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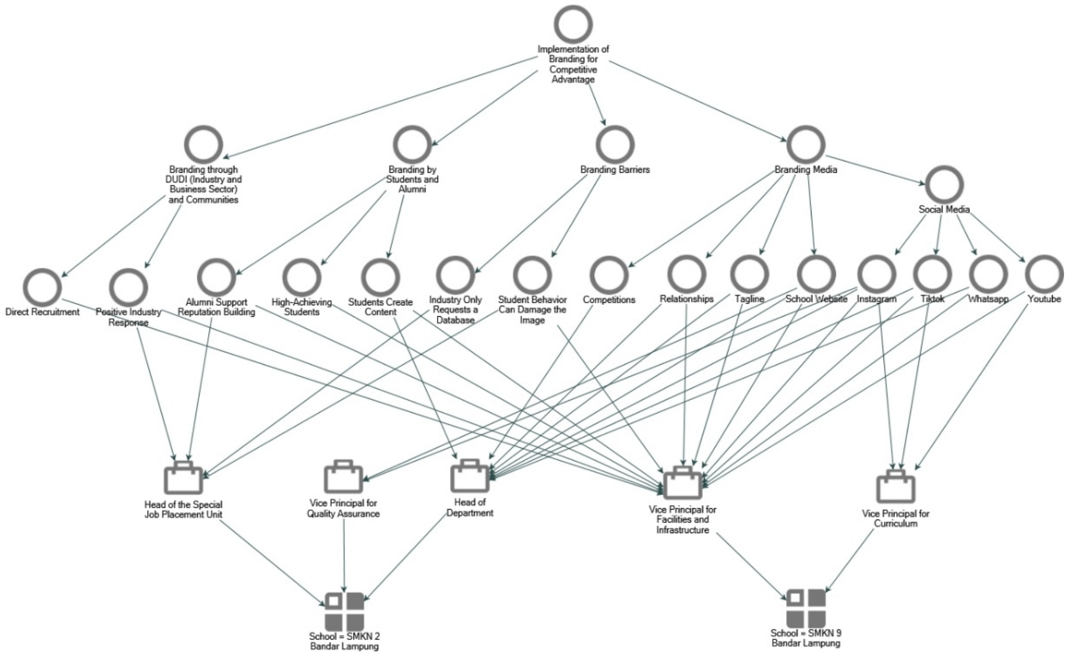

Figure 3. Implementation of Branding for Competitive Advantage

Figure 3 illustrates that branding implementation is carried out through four main pathways: DUDI and community partnerships, students and alumni, branding media, and branding barriers. These pathways show that branding is both relational and communicative. It is not centralized only in a formal promotion team, but distributed across school actors and external stakeholders.

The first pathway is branding through DUDI and communities. Industry and community partnerships function as important branding channels for vocational high schools. Schools build their reputation through internship placement, competency tests, recruitment activities, professional forums, alumni networks, and community collaboration. One participant explained that the school cooperates with various communities and professional organizations, including automotive communities, professional forums, internet provider associations, and robotics communities. These partnerships support student practice, teacher upskilling, and public visibility.

The findings also show that industry recognition becomes a strong indicator of branding success. In several cases, industry partners provided positive feedback and recruited students directly after internship. One participant explained:

> "*When a company needed new employees, they directly recruited from our school without open recruitment. This means that the students' work culture has been recognized.*" (P5)

This finding confirms that industry-based branding is built through trust. For vocational high schools, industry trust is more meaningful than promotional

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claims because it reflects external validation of student competence, work culture, and graduate quality.

The second pathway is branding through students and alumni. Students are not only recipients of educational services, but also active brand agents. They create promotional videos, share department information through WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram, participate in competitions, produce creative works, and represent the school through their behavior. One participant stated: "*Students usually use social media such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram to share videos or information about their departments.*" (P3)

This finding shows that students contribute directly to digital branding. Their creativity becomes part of the school's public communication. Student achievement, behavior, and digital content help communicate school quality to prospective students, parents, and wider communities.

Alumni also play an important role in branding. They return to school to mentor students, provide technical training, share workplace experience, and support job placement. In the Geomatics department, alumni working in consulting and industrial sectors have returned to guide students, including through drone training. One participant noted: "*Some alumni who work in consulting or industry come back to guide students. There was even training on drone use.*" (P3)

This alumni involvement strengthens the school's reputation because alumni become evidence of graduate outcomes. Alumni are not only former students, but also informal ambassadors who connect schools with industry and reinforce public trust.

The third pathway is branding media. Schools use websites, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, school taglines, department slogans, and word-of-mouth communication to disseminate institutional identity and achievements. Digital media are used to display school profiles, vision and mission, student achievement, department activities, competitions, projects, and school programs. One participant explained:

> "*We actively use social media, from the school website to Instagram, to display important information such as the school profile, vision and mission, student achievements, and school activities.*" (P2)

The findings show that digital media help schools reach wider audiences, including prospective students from outside the local area. However, digital branding is effective only when supported by real school quality. Media platforms function as channels to communicate evidence, not as substitutes for educational quality.

The fourth pathway is branding barriers. The analysis reveals several obstacles, including the absence of a formal promotion team, limited formal evaluation of branding, competition among schools, student discipline problems, teacher shortages, limited funding for BKK activities, and industry requests that sometimes only involve student databases without actual recruitment. One

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participant emphasized: "*Branding cannot only be image-making. The best branding is shown through students' achievement and behavior in society and the workplace.*" (P5)

This statement reflects a critical finding of the study: branding must be evidence-based. Schools must maintain student behavior, strengthen internal quality, and ensure that digital promotion is aligned with actual performance. Negative student behavior outside school, weak discipline, or unfulfilled industry expectations may damage school image. Therefore, branding management requires not only publication, but also reputation control, student development, and continuous evaluation.

Causal Factors of Competitive Advantage

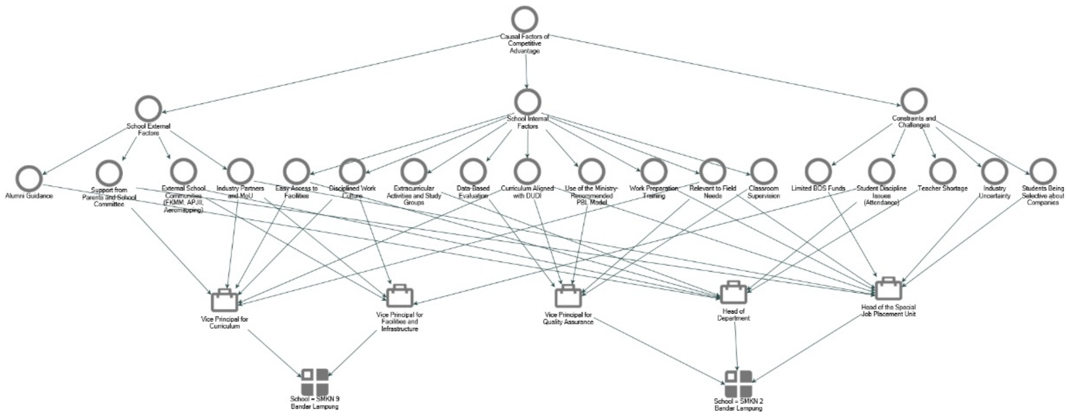

Figure 4. Causal Factors of Competitive Advantage

Figure 4 presents the causal factors of competitive advantage in vocational high schools. The analysis identifies three groups of factors: internal school factors, external school factors, and constraints or challenges. These three groups interact dynamically in shaping the school's competitive position.

The first group consists of internal school factors. These include curriculum alignment with DUDI, Project-Based Learning, classroom supervision, data-based evaluation, work culture, facilities, extracurricular activities, teacher development, and student career preparation. Curriculum alignment emerged as a central factor because vocational schools are expected to prepare students for real workplace demands. A participant explained that vocational learning differs from general high school learning because it must follow industrial needs: "*In vocational schools, learning must be adjusted to industry needs. We ensure that what students learn is relevant to the world of work.*" (P1)

This finding shows that curriculum relevance is not only an academic matter, but also a source of competitive advantage. When schools can demonstrate that their curriculum is connected to industry needs, they gain stronger credibility among parents, students, and employers.

Project-Based Learning also strengthens competitiveness by helping students produce concrete works. Participants explained that students are encouraged to create products, simple tools, videos, applications, and

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department-based projects. Some student innovations include automatic feeding systems, plant watering systems, room humidity monitoring applications, and automatic parking systems. These products strengthen school identity as a vocational institution that emphasizes practical competence and creativity.

Another important internal factor is work culture. Students are trained in discipline, punctuality, responsibility, politeness, communication, teamwork, and adaptability. The BKK also provides preparation for job applications, interviews, psychotests, industrial mathematics tests, physical readiness, and career planning. One participant explained: "*There are four main things we do: preparing students, strengthening soft skills, connecting students with industry, and providing career guidance.*" (P4)

This finding shows that the special job placement unit contributes strategically to competitive advantage. BKK does not only distribute job information, but also prepares students to enter the labor market through soft skills, career readiness, and direct recruitment facilitation.

The second group consists of external school factors. These include alumni guidance, parent and committee support, industry partnerships, community collaboration, and public trust. Alumni and industry partners are especially important because they validate the school's quality. In one school, approximately thirty companies regularly conduct recruitment, while more than one hundred companies have been connected through cooperation over time. Several companies, including large industrial partners, have recruited graduates or participated in school recruitment activities. One participant stated: "*Some companies regularly recruit from our school. Our alumni are widely distributed in various companies, and this increases industry trust.*" (P4)

This finding indicates that competitive advantage is reinforced by graduate traceability and industry confidence. When alumni perform well in the workplace, the school's reputation becomes stronger. Industry partners then become more willing to recruit, collaborate, and provide feedback to the school.

Parents and communities also contribute to school competitiveness. Participants reported that many parents send younger siblings or other family members to the same school because they are satisfied with previous educational experiences. This word-of-mouth recommendation strengthens public trust and supports the school's position as a preferred institution.

The third group consists of constraints and challenges. The data show that competitive advantage is affected by limited funding, teacher shortages, student discipline problems, limited land, industry uncertainty, and students' tendency to be selective about companies. BKK activities, for example, are not always fully supported by operational funds, so the school needs alternative strategies such as online testing or company support during recruitment activities. One participant explained: "*From the school side, the challenge is funding. Some BKK activities cannot be financed through BOS, so we need alternatives such as online tests or support from companies.*" (P4)

This finding shows that competitive advantage depends not only on available resources, but also on adaptive problem-solving. Schools with strong

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leadership, flexible coordination, and active partnerships are better able to respond to constraints and maintain their competitive position.

Competitive Advantage of Vocational High Schools

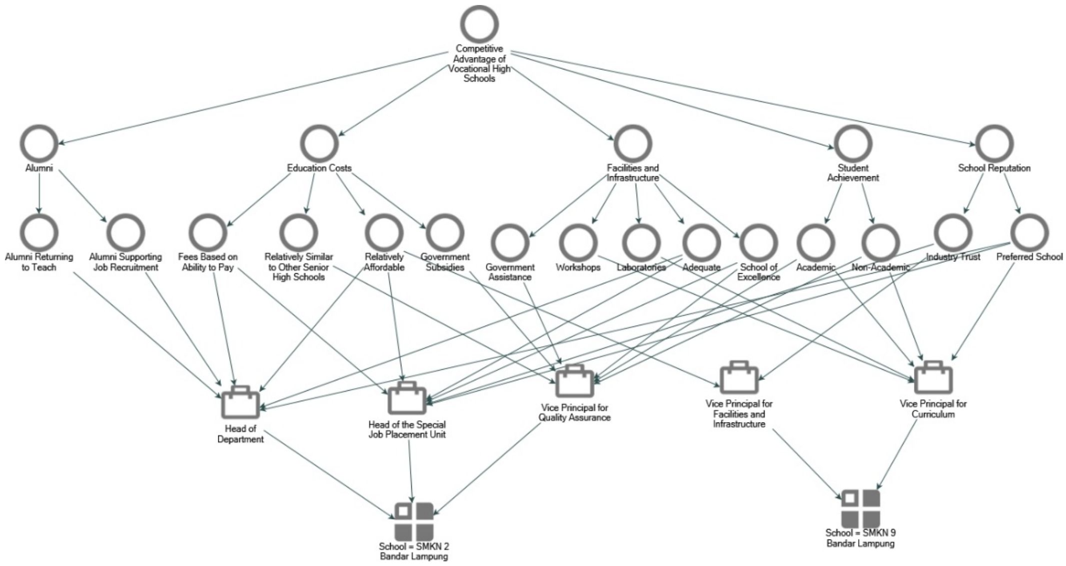

Figure 5. Competitive Advantage of Vocational High Schools

Figure 5 shows that the competitive advantage of vocational high schools appears in five visible forms: alumni, education costs, facilities and infrastructure, student achievement, and school reputation. These forms represent the outcomes of strategic branding management. They also show that vocational school competitiveness is not limited to attracting new students, but includes employability, affordability, performance evidence, and stakeholder trust.

The first form is alumni-based competitive advantage. Alumni contribute to school competitiveness by mentoring students, supporting technical training, sharing workplace experience, and strengthening recruitment networks. Alumni who are successfully employed become informal ambassadors of school quality. Their career trajectories provide evidence that the school is able to produce graduates who are accepted by industry. This is especially important in vocational education, where graduate employability becomes one of the main indicators of school quality.

The second form is education cost advantage. The findings show that education costs are perceived as relatively affordable and adjusted to parent capacity or school committee agreements. Participants explained that costs are generally related to practical learning needs, uniforms, or committee-based arrangements, and schools try to ensure that fees do not become a heavy burden for families. Affordability strengthens public perception that vocational education provides practical value while remaining accessible.

The third form is facilities and infrastructure. Workshops, laboratories, practice equipment, digital tools, and department facilities strengthen the credibility of vocational schools. Participants explained that relatively complete

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facilities, government assistance, and school excellence programs support practical learning. In vocational schools, facilities are not merely physical assets; they function as proof of institutional readiness to deliver skill-based education. Adequate facilities also support student projects, competitions, industry-based practice, and department-specific identity.

The fourth form is student achievement. Students participate in academic and non-academic competitions, create digital content, produce department works, and develop practical innovations. Student achievement is actively published through social media and becomes evidence of school quality. One participant explained:

> "*Students are creative. They make video content, department works, and simple tools. Some departments also help other departments produce promotional content.*" (P1)

This finding shows that student achievement and creativity function as branding evidence. When students produce visible works and gain recognition, the school's reputation becomes stronger.

The fifth form is school reputation. Reputation is built through industry trust, public satisfaction, alumni success, student behavior, community recognition, and digital visibility. In vocational high schools, reputation becomes strong when stakeholders can see concrete evidence of quality. Industry partners recognize students' work culture, parents recommend the school to others, alumni return to support departments, and students represent the school through achievement and behavior. Thus, school reputation is not produced only by formal promotion, but by accumulated stakeholder experience.

The findings indicate that strategic branding management in vocational high schools follows an integrated pattern: internal excellence becomes the substance of branding, students and alumni become active branding agents, industry and community partnerships validate school quality, and competitive advantage appears through employability, affordability, facilities, achievement, and reputation. Therefore, the movement from internal excellence to industry trust is the central mechanism through which vocational high schools strengthen sustainable competitive advantage.

Summary of Results

The overall results show that strategic branding management in vocational high schools is an integrated process of building, communicating, validating, and sustaining institutional value. First, schools build internal excellence through shared values, teacher competence, work culture, strategic direction, organizational coordination, leadership, and quality improvement systems. Second, schools implement branding through digital media, students, alumni, DUDI partnerships, community networks, and department-based identity formation. Third, competitive advantage is shaped by the interaction between internal capability, external stakeholder support, and the school's ability to

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manage constraints. Fourth, competitive advantage becomes visible through alumni contribution, affordable education costs, facilities, student achievement, and school reputation.

These findings confirm that branding in vocational high schools cannot be reduced to promotion. It is an evidence-based strategic management process that connects school culture, leadership, curriculum relevance, student performance, alumni networks, industry partnership, digital communication, and public trust. The NVivo findings show that competitive advantage emerges when internal quality is consistently demonstrated through real actions, visible achievements, graduate employability, and stakeholder recognition.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that strategic branding management in vocational high schools is not a linear promotional activity, but an integrated process that moves from internal excellence to industry trust. This interpretation is important because many discussions of school branding tend to emphasize visibility, promotion, and public communication. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that branding in vocational high schools becomes meaningful only when it is supported by real institutional quality, stakeholder participation, graduate employability, and industry recognition. Therefore, the discussion is organized around four interconnected dimensions: internal excellence as the substance of branding, stakeholder-based branding implementation, causal factors of competitive advantage, and visible outcomes of vocational school competitiveness.

Strategy for Enhancing School Excellence

The first finding indicates that strategic branding in vocational high schools begins with the strengthening of internal excellence. Shared values, teacher competence, staff culture, strategy, organizational structure, leadership style, and quality systems are not merely internal management components; they function as the foundation of the school brand. This finding confirms that the public image of a vocational high school is shaped not only by slogans, social media posts, or formal promotion, but also by what stakeholders repeatedly experience in daily school practices. Discipline, responsibility, collaboration, religious activities, teacher presence, and student appreciation become part of the school’s lived identity.

From a strategic management perspective, these findings suggest that branding must be embedded in institutional planning and quality management. Strategic branding is not separated from curriculum, leadership, coordination, evaluation, and human resource development. This supports Berndt and Pantelic (2026), who argue that educational branding begins with the identification of values and the consistent communication of those values in educational practices. It also aligns with Marjanović et al. (2023), who emphasize that educational brands are strengthened through instrumental values that reflect institutional identity and perceived quality. In this study, values are not only symbolic but operational.

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They are practiced through discipline routines, teacher collaboration, student development, and leadership direction.

The findings also strengthen the resource-based view of competitive advantage. In vocational high schools, valuable resources include teacher competence, practical learning facilities, work culture, leadership, curriculum relevance, student achievement, alumni networks, and DUDI partnerships. These resources become a source of competitive advantage when they are organized into a coherent system and recognized by external stakeholders. Teacher competence is especially important because vocational education must continuously follow industrial, technological, and occupational changes. This finding is consistent with Syamsuddin et al. (2023), who show that vocational curriculum renewal aligned with professional and industrial standards can enhance students' competitive advantage. It is also supported by Thiel de Gafenco et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of practical expertise, digital systems, and work-process-integrated learning in vocational education.

Leadership also emerges as a key mechanism that transforms internal resources into institutional excellence. Responsive, firm, communicative, and open leadership helps align school values, staff culture, supervision, teacher development, and problem-solving. This finding supports Depoo et al. (2022), who highlight the importance of fast responses, open communication, continuous feedback, and adaptive management in maintaining institutional quality and reputation. In the vocational school context, leadership does not only manage administrative routines; it sustains the internal credibility of branding. Without leadership that consistently strengthens discipline, coordination, and learning quality, branding would remain superficial.

Thus, the first contribution of this study is the argument that internal excellence is the substance of vocational school branding. Branding becomes credible when the school can demonstrate real quality through curriculum relevance, teacher competence, student discipline, learning systems, leadership consistency, and institutional culture. This extends educational branding literature by showing that branding in vocational schools must be grounded in internal capability before it can produce external trust.

Implementation of Branding for Competitive Advantage

The second finding shows that branding implementation in vocational high schools is distributed across multiple actors and channels. Branding is not carried out only by a formal promotion team or public relations unit. It is co-constructed by school leaders, teachers, students, alumni, departments, DUDI partners, communities, parents, and digital audiences. This confirms the relevance of stakeholder-based branding in vocational education. Each stakeholder contributes to shaping school reputation: students through behavior and achievement, alumni through career trajectories and mentoring, DUDI through recruitment and feedback, parents through recommendation, and digital media through public visibility.

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This finding supports Ikhwan et al. (2025), who found that effective school marketing management involves branding planning, resource organization, student participation, parent involvement, digital promotion, quality control, and stakeholder satisfaction. It also supports Mahmud et al. (2025), who show that school branding can be strengthened through program excellence, leadership, social media, alumni networks, facilities, and administrative professionalism. However, the present study extends these findings by showing that in vocational high schools, branding is more strongly validated through industry trust and employability evidence. The involvement of DUDI, alumni, and students makes branding more concrete and less dependent on promotional claims.

Digital media play an important role in expanding visibility. Websites, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, school taglines, and department slogans help schools communicate their identity, achievements, programs, and student creativity. This supports Bohara et al. (2022), who explain that brand awareness influences educational choice because recognition, recall, perceived value, and familiarity reduce uncertainty in students' enrollment decisions. Terentieva et al. (2025) also argue that digital brand management increasingly depends on interactive, personalized, and omnichannel communication. In this study, digital media function not only as channels of promotion, but also as platforms for displaying evidence of student performance, department identity, practical projects, and school achievements.

Nevertheless, the findings also show that digital visibility alone is insufficient. Branding faces several barriers, including student discipline problems, limited formal branding evaluation, the absence of a formal promotion team, teacher shortages, limited funding, and industry uncertainty. This indicates that branding requires reputation management. The school must manage not only what is published online, but also how students and alumni represent the school in society and the workplace. This supports Zghurska et al. (2023), who warn that brand image in digital space requires protection because reputation can be weakened by inconsistency or negative public perception. Pei et al. (2022) also show that online community behavior can influence organizational performance, which means that stakeholder behavior becomes part of brand performance.

The second contribution of this study is the idea of distributed vocational school branding. Branding is not located only in media communication, but distributed across internal actors and external stakeholders. In vocational high schools, the most persuasive branding is often carried by students, alumni, and industry partners because they provide direct evidence of school quality. Therefore, branding implementation should be understood as a stakeholder-based process of communicating, representing, and validating institutional value.

Causal Factors of Competitive Advantage

The third finding shows that vocational school competitiveness is shaped by internal factors, external factors, and constraints. Internal factors include curriculum alignment with DUDI, Project-Based Learning, classroom supervision, data-based evaluation, facilities, teacher development, work culture,

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extracurricular activities, and career preparation. External factors include alumni guidance, parent and committee support, industry partnerships, professional communities, and public trust. Meanwhile, constraints include limited funding, teacher shortages, student discipline issues, limited land, industry uncertainty, and students' tendency to be selective about employment opportunities.

From the resource-based view, these findings indicate that competitive advantage is created when internal resources are valuable, organized, and recognized by stakeholders. Curriculum alignment with DUDI, for example, is valuable because it connects classroom learning with labor market needs. Project-Based Learning is valuable because it enables students to produce concrete works and develop practical competence. Teacher development is valuable because it ensures that teachers understand not only theory but also industrial practice. Facilities are valuable because vocational learning depends heavily on practical tools, laboratories, workshops, and technology. These findings are consistent with Molate et al. (2024), who view branding as a strategic resource that supports reputation and competitive advantage, and with Vukčević and Kedačić (2025), who emphasize that branding contributes to long-term relevance, loyalty, and competitiveness.

The role of DUDI and alumni is particularly important because they serve as external validators of school quality. In vocational education, competitive advantage is not measured only by enrollment attractiveness, but also by employability, recruitment networks, internship quality, graduate performance, and industry trust. This finding supports Górska-Warsewicz (2024), who shows that innovative partnerships can strengthen brand, product, consumer, and performance outcomes. In this study, DUDI partnerships and alumni networks create relational branding, where the school's reputation is reinforced through recruitment, mentoring, competency testing, workplace feedback, and graduate distribution. Zhao et al. (2026) also emphasize the importance of reputation incentives and traceability in strengthening trust. In vocational high schools, alumni performance and industry feedback function as reputational traceability that proves the quality of graduates.

The constraints identified in this study also show that competitive advantage depends on adaptive capacity. Schools do not always have ideal resources. They face funding limitations, teacher shortages, land constraints, discipline problems, and uncertain industry responses. However, these constraints can become triggers for innovation when schools are able to respond through alternative strategies, such as online recruitment tests, company-supported activities, stronger community partnerships, teacher peer support, and more flexible coordination. This aligns with Marengo et al. (2022), who emphasize that continuous innovation requires team involvement, indicators, co-creation, branding, and human development. Komari (2025) also demonstrates that knowledge management, innovation, and brand image can contribute to competitive advantage.

The third contribution of this study is that vocational school competitive advantage is not produced by internal quality alone, nor by external promotion

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alone. It emerges from the interaction between internal capability, external stakeholder support, and adaptive problem-solving. This means that strategic branding management must be connected to school improvement, partnership management, resource mobilization, and risk response.

Competitive Advantage of Vocational High Schools

The fourth finding identifies alumni, education costs, facilities and infrastructure, student achievement, and school reputation as visible forms of competitive advantage. These findings show that competitiveness in vocational high schools is multidimensional. Alumni represent employability and industry recognition; education costs represent accessibility and perceived value; facilities represent learning credibility; student achievement represents performance evidence; and school reputation represents accumulated stakeholder trust.

From a brand equity perspective, these outcomes show that vocational school branding is built through trust, perceived quality, reputation, and stakeholder experience. This supports Chen et al. (2023), who argue that brand equity is shaped by brand trust, communication, customer perception, and perceived value. In vocational high schools, parents and students may not evaluate brand equity through willingness to pay premium prices, but through affordability, employability, facilities, reputation, student achievement, and confidence in graduate outcomes. Kaban and Augustinus (2025) also show that brand recommendation and loyalty are influenced by service environment and marketing innovation. In this study, recommendation from parents, alumni involvement, student achievement, and industry recognition become forms of brand loyalty and stakeholder trust.

The affordability of education also has important implications. In many branding studies, competitive advantage is often associated with prestige or premium positioning. However, this study shows that affordability can also become a competitive advantage when it is combined with quality, facilities, employability, and public trust. This indicates that vocational school branding is not only about building prestige, but also about demonstrating social relevance. This supports Kurniawati and Kohar (2025), who show that digital media and community-based management can enhance competitive advantage when supported by stakeholder satisfaction and sustainability. In vocational high schools, affordability strengthens the school’s accessibility and makes its brand more inclusive.

Facilities and student achievement further strengthen the credibility of branding. In vocational schools, facilities are not merely physical assets; they are evidence that the school is capable of delivering skill-based learning. Similarly, student achievement is not merely symbolic recognition; it is proof of learning quality, creativity, and practical competence. Fieiras Ceide et al. (2023) highlight that employer branding depends on the ability to communicate attributes, benefits, and competencies to attract talent. In vocational schools, a similar logic applies: schools must communicate their graduate quality, facilities, work culture, and industry relevance to attract students and gain employer trust.

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The fourth contribution of this study is the identification of vocational school competitive advantage as an evidence-based outcome. Competitive advantage is not limited to the number of applicants or promotional reach. It is reflected in alumni employability, industry recruitment, public trust, facilities, student achievement, affordability, and reputation. Thus, the success of strategic branding management can be seen when the school is trusted by parents, chosen by prospective students, recognized by industry, and represented positively by alumni and students.

Integrated Discussion and Conceptual Contribution

Overall, this study contributes to educational branding literature by proposing that strategic branding management in vocational high schools follows an integrated movement from internal excellence to industry trust. Internal excellence provides the substance of branding, stakeholder-based branding communicates and represents that substance, industry and community validation strengthen credibility, and competitive advantage appears through employability, reputation, affordability, facilities, and achievement. This means that branding in vocational schools is not simply a promotional strategy, but an evidence-based strategic management process.

This study extends previous research in three ways. First, it connects educational branding with vocational competitiveness by showing that branding in vocational high schools is strongly influenced by curriculum relevance, work culture, teacher competence, practical learning, student achievement, alumni networks, and DUDI trust. Second, it expands stakeholder-based branding by showing that students, alumni, parents, communities, and industry partners are not passive audiences, but active co-producers of school reputation. Third, it clarifies that brand equity in vocational high schools is not only formed through awareness and image, but through employability evidence, industry recognition, graduate traceability, affordability, and public trust.

Practically, the findings suggest that vocational high schools should manage branding as part of school improvement. Schools need to strengthen internal quality before intensifying promotion, institutionalize branding evaluation, involve students and alumni as brand ambassadors, maintain student discipline as part of reputation management, develop stronger DUDI partnerships, and use digital media to communicate evidence of real quality. Therefore, strategic branding management should be positioned as an integrated managerial function that connects curriculum, leadership, human resources, student development, alumni relations, industry collaboration, facilities, and public communication.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that strategic branding management in vocational high schools is an integrated process that moves from internal excellence to industry trust. Branding is not merely a promotional activity through social media, slogans, or school publications, but a strategic management practice grounded in

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real institutional quality. The findings show that school excellence is strengthened through shared values, teacher competence, disciplined work culture, responsive leadership, organizational coordination, curriculum alignment with DUDI, Project-Based Learning, evaluation systems, and student achievement. These internal strengths become the substance of branding when they are consistently communicated and validated by students, alumni, parents, communities, and industry partners.

Theoretically, this study contributes to educational branding literature by reframing vocational school branding as an evidence-based and stakeholder-based process. It extends the understanding of brand equity in education by showing that, in vocational high schools, reputation is not formed only through awareness and image, but also through employability evidence, alumni contribution, industry recognition, affordability, facilities, and public trust. Practically, the findings suggest that vocational high schools should strengthen internal quality before intensifying promotion, involve students and alumni as brand ambassadors, institutionalize branding evaluation, maintain student discipline as part of reputation management, and develop stronger DUDI partnerships to sustain competitive advantage.

This study has several limitations. The research used a qualitative design with a limited number of informants, so the findings cannot be generalized to all vocational high schools. In addition, the study focused on school actors' perspectives and did not quantitatively measure the direct effect of branding management on enrollment, brand equity, industry trust, or graduate employability. Future studies are recommended to use mixed-method or quantitative approaches to test the relationship between strategic branding management, stakeholder trust, school reputation, student enrollment, and graduate outcomes across broader vocational school contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan/LPDP), Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, through the doctoral scholarship awarded to the first author. The authors also express their sincere appreciation to the participating vocational high schools and all research informants in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, for their valuable information, time, and cooperation throughout the data collection process. Appreciation is also extended to the Educational Administration Study Program, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, for the academic support provided during the completion of this research.

Author Contributions

Tetty Efriyanti Girsang: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, writing—original draft, and project administration. Udin Saefudin Saud: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, validation, interpretation of findings, and writing—review and

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editing. Johar Permana: Methodology, supervision, validation, critical analysis, and writing—review and editing. Abubakar: Supervision, validation, interpretation of findings, and writing—review and editing. All authors contributed to the intellectual development of the study, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

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