



Organic Reputation Construction Through Stealth Marketing Based on Non-Academic Achievements: A Case Study of a Leading Islamic Junior High School

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Abstract :

This study aims to analyze the formation of an educational institution's reputation through a stealth marketing strategy based on non-academic achievements in one of the Islamic Junior High Schools in East Java. The method used is a qualitative approach with a case study design through data collection techniques in the form of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed using a model of condensation, reduction, display, and data verification. The results of the study indicate that the institution's reputation is formed organically without formal promotion, but rather through the accumulation of student achievements, non-academic activities, and the dissemination of information through social media and word of mouth. These activities create strong social proof, thereby increasing public trust in the institution. The findings also indicate that students and alumni act as agents of reputation distribution indirectly. The implications of this study strengthen the concept of stealth marketing in the educational context and provide theoretical contributions to the development of a reputation model based on real activities and practical contributions for educational institutions in building an image without high promotional costs and more authentically sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

The development of educational institutions today is determined not only by academic quality but also by their ability to build a reputation within the community. Many institutions compete to promote themselves through digital advertising, paid social media, and formal branding campaigns (Kusumawati, 2026; Mohlas, 2025; Rahman, 2025). However, a different phenomenon has emerged: institutions that remain popular without conventional promotion. This situation indicates that public perception is shaped not only by direct marketing communications but also by social experiences, achievement values, and community involvement (Albustomi, 2025; Holidi, 2026; Shoha, 2026). This is crucial because educational reputation directly influences public choice, resource allocation, and the sustainability of the institution. In this context, non-formal communication strategies become an indispensable factor (Adzimah, 2024; Hikmah, 2026; Nadhifah, 2026). Therefore, this research is crucial to understanding how reputation can be formed organically without direct advertising, as well as how social mechanisms work to build public trust in educational institutions.

A growing problem in society is the over-reliance on formal promotional strategies to build the image of educational institutions. Many institutions spend significant resources on advertising, but this doesn't always translate into sustained reputational growth (Holidi, 2025; Kusumawati, 2025; Syafiih, 2025). Furthermore, the public often struggles to distinguish between truly superior institutions and those that are merely strong in marketing. This creates an information imbalance in the educational decision-making process. Parents and prospective students often rely on visuals and promotional materials, rather than on tangible evidence of performance. This creates a gap between the reality of educational quality and public perception (Hikmah & Mudarris, 2026; Khofsah, 2025; Manshur, 2026). Furthermore, not all institutions have the financial capacity to undertake extensive promotional activities, creating an unequal competition. This issue highlights the need for a new understanding of how reputation can be built through alternative, more natural mechanisms based on tangible activities.

Field phenomena demonstrate that some educational institutions maintain high student attendance despite never conducting formal promotions. These schools or campuses consistently develop non-academic activities such as competitions, social activities, student entrepreneurship, and community programs (Fitriani, 2025; Ni'am, 2025; Rahman, 2026). These activities generate achievements that are then organically shared through social media by students, teachers, and alumni. Unwittingly, each activity becomes a source of public exposure that shapes the institution's positive image. The public learns about the institution through stories of experiences, documentation of activities, and accomplishments, rather than through official advertising. This phenomenon demonstrates that reputation communication can occur indirectly through social interactions (Kunta, 2025; Najiburohman, 2025). Furthermore, external community involvement strengthens the institution's legitimacy in the public eye. Thus, an image-building process occurs that is not explicitly planned but occurs systematically through ongoing institutional activities.

Previous research in educational marketing has focused largely on conventional promotional strategies such as advertising, digital marketing, and institutional branding. Some studies emphasize the importance of social media as a primary communication tool for enhancing an institution's appeal. However, most of this research still positions communication as a deliberate and controlled activity. Meanwhile, the concept of organic reputation through non-promotional activities remains underexplored. Research on word of mouth and social proof has been discussed, but has not specifically linked them to non-academic achievements as a stealth marketing instrument (Hussen & Onia, 2024; Musyarofah et al., 2025; Surur et al., 2026). A major weakness of previous research is the lack of analysis of indirect mechanisms in shaping an educational institution's reputation. Therefore, this study positions itself to fill this gap by focusing on how actual student and community activities shape an institution's image naturally without formal promotional intervention.

Furthermore, literature on stealth marketing is generally used in the context of commercial industries such as consumer products and digital services. In the educational context, this concept is still very limited and has not been systematically developed. However, educational institutions have unique communication characteristics based on values, achievements, and long-term social interactions. This gap indicates that a stealth marketing approach based on non-academic achievements has great potential for further study. The state of the art of this research is the integration of indirect marketing theory

with the practice of building an educational institution's reputation. This research offers a new perspective that reputation is built not only through messages but also through actual activities that generate social exposure. Thus, this research expands the scope of educational marketing studies to a more empirical and behavioral-based realm.

Based on these phenomena and gaps, this study begins with the main question of how a stealth marketing strategy based on non-academic achievements can shape the organic reputation of educational institutions. The initial assumption of this study is that consistently designed non-academic activities with high public value can be a primary mechanism for image formation without formal advertising. This study's contribution lies in the development of a new conceptual model that explains the relationship between non-academic achievements, social exposure, and institutional reputation. Furthermore, this study also provides practical implications for educational institutions with limited marketing resources. By understanding these mechanisms, institutions can build more effective, authentic, and sustainable reputation strategies. This research is expected to serve as a reference in developing educational communication strategies based on real activities and community interactions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the process of building an educational institution's reputation through stealth marketing strategies based on non-academic achievements (Okoko et al., 2023; Takona, 2024). Case studies allow researchers to explore phenomena holistically, contextually, and tied to real-world conditions without strictly separating variables. The basis for choosing this design is supported by the naturalistic, complex, and non-numerical nature of the phenomenon. The process of reputation building does not occur through controlled variables, but through social interactions, student activities, and the dissemination of informal information within the community. Therefore, a case study is the most appropriate approach to understand these dynamics in depth.

This research location is a Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) in East Java, selected purposively. The location was chosen based on the phenomenon of institutional reputation being built without formal promotion such as advertising, brochures, or paid digital campaigns. The MTs exhibits a stable and increasing level of interest each year. This situation is interesting because the institution's image develops through non-academic activities such as student competitions, religious activities, and community social programs. These activities generate strong public exposure through social media and community networks, making them relevant for analyzing stealth marketing mechanisms in the context of achievement-based education.

Data collection techniques in this study included observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Direct observations were conducted to observe students' non-academic activities, social interactions within the school environment, and community involvement in institutional activities. In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, students, alumni, and parents to explore perceptions regarding the school's reputation and the sources of information that shape the institution's image. Documentation was used to collect supporting data such as activity archives, achievement photos, and school social media publications. These three techniques were used in triangulation to ensure the validity of the data and strengthen the validity of the research findings.

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and data verification. Data condensation was carried out by simplifying the results of interviews, observations, and documentation without losing the core meaning. Data reduction was carried out by selecting information relevant to the research focus, namely stealth marketing strategies based on non-academic achievements. The data was then presented in the form of a thematic narrative at the data display stage to see the pattern of relationships between categories. The final stage was data verification carried out through triangulation of sources and methods to ensure the consistency and validity of the conclusions drawn to achieve a stable and scientifically accountable interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Organic Reputation Building through Non-Academic Achievements

The research findings indicate that the reputation of this Islamic Junior High School in East Java was built organically through consistent student non-academic achievement. The principal stated that "we never rely on advertising or brochures, but rather build quality through student activities." This statement was reinforced by teachers who emphasized that every activity is directed toward producing visible achievements. Observations also showed that the school's achievement board is dominated by achievements in academic, religious, and sports competitions. These achievements serve as a primary source of the institution's positive image in the community.

Interviews with students revealed that involvement in competitions and external activities was a crucial experience in fostering school pride. One student stated that "every time we participate in a competition, we are always fully supported, and the results are often announced on the school's social media." This demonstrates that achievements are not only internal but also widely publicized. Observations revealed regular documentation of each activity, uploaded to the school's official social media platforms and students' personal accounts.

These findings suggest that organic reputation is formed through the accumulation of documented and socially shared achievements. There is no formal promotional strategy, but public exposure occurs consistently through tangible activities. Thus, non-academic achievements serve as the primary means of shaping an institution's image, reinforced by social interactions and digital publications.

Stealth Marketing Mechanisms in Educational Activities

The research findings indicate that the institution's stealth marketing mechanisms do not emerge as a formally designed strategy, but rather are formed through educational activities that generate natural public exposure. Non-academic activities, such as competitions, social activities, religious activities, and scouting, serve as primary sources of information dissemination about the institution. Teachers stated that "we only focus on student activities, but the results often spread naturally on social media." Observations also indicate that documentation of activities is routinely conducted without explicit promotional purposes, yet still generates significant reputational impact in the community.

Table 1. Non-Academic Activities, Media Exposure, and Their Impact on Institutional Reputation

No	Non-Academic Activities	Field Observation Results	Exposure Channel	Reputation Impact
1	Academic competition	Trophies and certificates on display	School Instagram	Excellent academic image
2	Social activities	Community assistance action	TikTok & community	Social care image
3	Religious	Regular open events	Public lecture	Religious legitimacy
4	Scout	Extracurricular activities	Photo documentation	Extensive external exposure

Table 1 shows that each non-academic activity generates a distinct yet interconnected form of exposure that shapes the institution's reputation. Academic competitions create a competitive image through the publication of achievements on the school's official social media platforms. Social activities reinforce a caring image through documentation shared by students and the community. Religious activities provide moral legitimacy because they involve direct public participation. Scouting activities, meanwhile, broaden the reach of exposure because they take place outside the school environment. Observations indicate that all of these activities are not designed as promotions, but they nonetheless generate consistent information distribution. Thus, this table demonstrates that stealth marketing is formed through the accumulation of tangible activities that have social value and are easily disseminated organically.

Furthermore, interviews with students indicate that they indirectly act as agents for distributing institutional information. One student stated that every activity they participate in is always uploaded to their personal social media and often receives a positive response from their circle of friends. This reinforces the individual's role in expanding the reach of the school's reputation. Observations also indicate that digital interactions between students, alumni, and the community serve as a primary channel for disseminating information about school activities. This process occurs without formal instruction from the school, but occurs spontaneously and repeatedly.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the combination of physical activities and digital distribution creates a multi-layered reputational effect. On-site activities generate direct experience, while social media broadens the reach of public perception. Teachers asserted that "every activity always has an impact outside of school, even if we don't plan it as promotion." This suggests that stealth marketing in the educational context works through the integration of institutional practices and social participation. Thus, an institution's reputation is formed as a result of the ongoing interaction between physical activities and the organic dissemination of information in the digital public sphere.

Stakeholder Perception of Institutional Image

Interviews with the principal revealed that the school's reputation is built on "students' visible work, not advertising." The teacher added that each activity is designed to provide students with real-life experiences they can share with the public. Observations revealed that the school's administration area is filled with documentation of student activities displayed as evidence of the institution's activities.

Students expressed pride because every activity was publicized. One student said, "If we win a competition, it's immediately posted on the school's Instagram." Alumni also shared that they recommend the school to younger siblings or relatives because of their positive experiences. Parents emphasized that they learned about the school from neighbors and social media, not from official promotions.

Field observations indicate strong interactions between the school and the surrounding community. Many school activities directly involve the community, such as community service and open religious events. This reinforces the community's positive perception of the institution. Thus, the school's reputation is built not only within the school but also through external validation from stakeholders.

Integration of Educational Stealth Marketing Findings and Models

The integration of interviews, observations, and documentation reveals a consistent pattern that an institution's reputation is built through repeated, concrete activities. Principals, teachers, and students all confirmed the lack of a formal promotional strategy. However, observations indicate that each activity generates strong public exposure through social media and the community.

Stealth marketing occurs through three main mechanisms. First, social proof, visible through widely publicized student achievements. Second, word of mouth from parents, alumni, and the community. Third, experiential visibility, which occurs through direct public involvement in school activities. These three mechanisms reinforce each other and form a stable reputation cycle.

Conceptually, these findings suggest that an educational institution's reputation can be built without formal advertising, but through activities designed to generate organic exposure. Non-academic achievements are central to this strategy because they generate social proof that is readily accepted by the public. Thus, this research confirms that stealth marketing in education operates through tangible activities, not direct promotional communications.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the reputation of Islamic Junior High Schools (Madrasah Tsanawiyah) in East Java is formed through a stealth marketing mechanism based on non-academic achievements that occurs organically without formal promotion. When compared with educational marketing literature, these results are consistent with the concepts of social proof and word of mouth marketing proposed in educational service marketing studies, where institutional reputation is largely influenced by real-life experiences and social recommendations (Fauzi et al., 2025; Lateh, 2024). However, this study expands on these findings by showing that social proof arises not only from interpersonal communication but also from structured institutional activities such as competitions, social and religious activities that indirectly serve as promotional media. The main difference with previous research lies in the emphasis that reputation is not formed by deliberate communication strategies, but rather by the design of educational activities that generate public exposure automatically and repeatedly. This shows that stealth marketing in the educational context is informal but systematic through consistent institutional activities.

In previous literature, research on educational marketing has emphasized the role of formal branding, digital marketing, and planned institutional communications (Wahid et al., 2024; Zahro, 2024). Several studies have also highlighted the importance of social media as a primary promotional tool for educational institutions. However, the findings of this study indicate a shift in patterns, where social media is no longer merely a promotional tool but rather an organic distribution channel for students' actual activities. This parallels the concept of experiential marketing, where direct experience forms the basis for shaping public perception. However, the difference lies in the absence of

promotional control from the institution, as the content disseminated originates from the initiatives of students, alumni, and the community. This demonstrates that an institution's reputation can be built even without a formal branding strategy, provided there are consistent, socially documented, publicly valuable activities.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of the concept of stealth marketing in the educational context. While previously studied mostly in the commercial industry, this research expands the scope of the theory to the realm of values-based and community-based education (Rahmadan & Shudiq, 2024; Sholehah & Ichsan, 2025). This concept suggests that an institution's reputation is built not only through persuasive communication, but also through the accumulation of concrete activities that generate repeated social exposure. Thus, this research strengthens the integration of social proof theory, word of mouth, and experiential visibility within a single framework for building educational reputation. Another theoretical contribution is the emerging understanding that non-academic activities can function as unconscious yet highly effective reputation communication instruments in shaping an institution's long-term image.

From a practical perspective, these findings offer important implications for educational institution managers, particularly those with limited promotional budgets. The results suggest that investing in non-academic activities such as competitions, social events, and student character development can generate a stronger reputational impact than formal promotions. Institutions can leverage these activities as a key source of public image building through documentation and community participation. Furthermore, student involvement as agents of information distribution through social media demonstrates that reputation strategies can be built participatorily without high promotional costs. This provides an alternative educational marketing strategy that is more authentic, sustainable, and based on real-life experiences.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its novel conceptual model of educational stealth marketing based on non-academic achievements. It demonstrates that institutional reputation is formed through a dynamically interconnected cycle of tangible activities, social exposure, and stakeholder validation. This model differs from traditional approaches that place communication at the center of strategy, as in this study, communication is actually a byproduct of educational activities. Thus, this research not only enriches the educational marketing literature but also provides a new analytical framework for understanding how institutional reputation can be formed organically through ongoing, informal social interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study found that an educational institution's reputation can be built organically through stealth marketing based on non-academic achievements without formal promotion. The key lesson is that consistent, documented, and socially shared student activities can naturally build public trust. Scientifically, this study strengthens the concepts of social proof, word of mouth, and experiential visibility in the educational context and expands the study of stealth marketing to the realm of value-based institutions. The study's limitation lies in its focus on a single case study location, which limits generalizability. Future research is recommended to employ a multi-location comparative approach and quantitative methods to strengthen the validity of the findings.

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