Journal of Research in
Educational Management
ISSN: 2964-5026 (p) 2964-4828 (e)
Vol. 5, No. 1, 2026
https://doi.org/10.71392/jrem.v5i1.176

OPEN ACCESS

Beyond Digital Promotion: Symbolic Interaction and the Construction of School Brand Identity through Social Media

Putri Fahmadia Dinda Maulida Thohir [1], Zainal Munir [2]
[1,2] *Nurul Jadid University, Indonesia*
[1] *Corresponding Author: putridnd@gmail.com*

Abstract : *Social media has transformed how educational institutions communicate their values, represent their activities, and construct their brand identities in the digital environment. However, school branding involves more than promotional visibility, as it also depends on how audiences interpret and attach meaning to the symbols presented through digital content. This study examines the role of symbolic interaction in shaping school brand identity through social media content marketing. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and social media administrators, alongside observations and content analysis of institutional Instagram posts. The findings reveal that documenting students' everyday activities, including batik production and school gardening, functions as a symbolic representation of the school's educational values, creativity, and commitment to inclusive education. These visual narratives communicate institutional characteristics while creating opportunities for audiences to interpret, recognize, and engage with the school's identity. Consistent content publication also contributes to audience engagement, emotional connection, and institutional credibility. This study contributes to educational branding literature by extending the understanding of social media content marketing beyond promotional communication toward the symbolic construction of institutional identity. It demonstrates how everyday educational practices can become meaningful digital representations that strengthen school brand identity, foster public trust, and distinguish educational institutions in an increasingly competitive digital environment.*

Keywords : *Symbolic Interaction; School Brand Identity; Social Media Content Marketing.*
Article History : Received: April 2026 Revised: May 2026 Accepted: June 2026

Copyright © 2026 Journal of Research in Educational Management, *All Rights Reserved*

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed communication practices, including how educational institutions establish relationships with their audiences and present their institutional identities. Communication is no longer restricted to conventional interactions or word-of-mouth promotion but increasingly takes place through digital platforms that enable institutions to distribute information, construct narratives, and engage with broader communities (Falah & Wibowo, 2023; Rahmawati et al., 2024). Social media, in particular, has become an important communication environment in which educational institutions can demonstrate their values, achievements, educational practices, and institutional characteristics (Lippens et al., 2023). Through these platforms, schools are not merely introducing their educational services but also constructing meanings that influence how audiences understand and perceive their institutional identity. Shams et al., (2024) emphasizes that a strong brand identity enables an organization to establish distinctive characteristics, strengthen audience recognition, and develop meaningful relationships with its stakeholders. Accordingly, social media has become more than a promotional instrument; it functions as a strategic space for constructing and communicating school brand identity in the contemporary digital environment.

The construction of school brand identity through social media involves more than the frequency of content publication or the attractiveness of visual presentations. It also depends on how institutional messages are represented, interpreted, and given meaning by audiences through digital interactions (Heru & Bali, 2024). From the perspective of symbolic interaction, communication involves the exchange of symbols through which individuals develop shared meanings and interpret social realities. In the context of educational institutions, photographs, videos, captions, student achievements, and documented learning activities can function as symbolic representations of the school's values, culture, and educational commitments (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023). These representations allow audiences, including parents, students, and the wider community, to recognize the distinctive characteristics of an institution. Husnan, (2023) discussion of self-presentation provides a relevant perspective for understanding how organizations present selected aspects of their identity to shape public impressions. Therefore, social media content should not be understood merely as information distributed to audiences but as a symbolic representation through which institutional identity is continuously communicated and interpreted.

Within this context, content marketing plays an important role in translating institutional activities into meaningful digital narratives. Wibowo & Rizal, (2023) explains that content marketing involves planning, distributing, and presenting content in ways that attract audiences and encourage positive perceptions of an organization. For educational institutions, this process can be realized through the documentation of learning activities, student accomplishments, extracurricular programs, institutional traditions, and everyday educational experiences. Instagram provides opportunities for schools to communicate these experiences

through visual and textual content that audiences can access, interpret, and respond to. Awaliah S et al., (2025) highlight the potential of Instagram to strengthen engagement between educational institutions, students, and communities, while Fitri, (2022) emphasize the opportunities offered by social media for educational institutions to communicate their distinctive characteristics and increase public recognition. These perspectives suggest that the effectiveness of educational content marketing depends not only on promotional messages but also on the ability of institutions to communicate meaningful experiences that reflect their actual educational practices.

The importance of this communication process becomes particularly relevant for special education institutions, which often need to communicate their educational approaches, student potential, and institutional values to a wider audience. Schools for students with special needs (Sekolah Luar Biasa/SLB) have distinctive educational characteristics because their learning processes involve individualized approaches, different forms of student development, and activities designed to accommodate diverse learning needs. However, public understanding of these institutions is not always formed through direct experience with their educational practices. Consequently, social media provides an opportunity for special education institutions to represent their educational activities and demonstrate that students possess valuable abilities, creativity, and developmental potential. Documenting student participation, creative work, learning achievements, and social activities can challenge narrow perceptions of special education while communicating the institution's commitment to meaningful and inclusive educational experiences. In this regard, social media content becomes a medium through which the school's educational identity is made visible and interpreted by the public.

This phenomenon can be observed in the social media practices of SLB Negeri Demung, which utilizes Instagram to document various educational and student development activities. The school's content includes everyday learning experiences, batik-making activities, and the cultivation and harvesting of school garden produce. These activities represent more than routine institutional documentation because they communicate particular meanings concerning creativity, independence, participation, and the development of students' abilities. For example, documenting students' involvement in batik production can symbolize the cultivation of practical skills and creative expression, while gardening activities can represent experiential learning, responsibility, and student participation. When these activities are consistently presented through Instagram, they create visual narratives through which audiences can recognize the school's educational characteristics and institutional commitments. Thus, the school's digital presence provides an opportunity to understand how everyday educational practices are transformed into symbolic representations that contribute to the construction of school brand identity.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between social media, symbolic representation, audience engagement, and institutional branding. Ubaidillah & Mundiri, (2023)

provides a perspective on self-presentation that helps explain how selected representations influence public perceptions of an organization. (Sumanti et al., 2024) highlight the role of Instagram in facilitating engagement between educational institutions and their communities. Similarly, Tsauri et al., (2024) discuss how social media can support educational institutions in communicating their characteristics and attracting public attention. Ceccarelli et al., (2024) further emphasize the importance of symbolic elements in digital content, particularly how representations of institutional culture and values can contribute to audience recognition and emotional connections. Taken together, these studies suggest that social media contributes to institutional image formation through visual communication, symbolic representation, and audience interaction. Nevertheless, the existing discussion tends to emphasize social media engagement, institutional visibility, and positive audience perceptions, leaving the process through which everyday educational activities acquire symbolic meanings and become part of a school's brand identity relatively underexplored.

This limitation becomes particularly significant in the context of special education institutions, where institutional identity is closely connected to how student abilities, educational experiences, and school values are represented to the public. Previous discussions have not sufficiently explained how specific visual and narrative elements, such as photographs, short videos, captions, and audience responses, work together to construct the meaning of a school's identity. More importantly, limited attention has been given to how ordinary educational activities can be transformed into symbolic representations that communicate the distinctive values of special education institutions. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between symbolic interaction and school brand identity construction through social media content marketing. Its contribution lies in shifting the understanding of school branding from digital promotion toward the symbolic construction of institutional identity, particularly by examining how educational activities become meaningful representations of institutional values and how these representations are communicated through digital platforms. In this way, the study extends the discussion of educational branding by connecting symbolic interaction, visual narratives, and the representation of student development within the context of special education.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore how symbolic interaction through social media content marketing contributes to the construction of school brand identity, particularly through Instagram. It specifically examines how educational activities are transformed into symbolic content, how institutional values are communicated through visual and textual representations, and how these representations contribute to public perceptions of the school's identity. Rather than positioning Instagram solely as a promotional platform, this study conceptualizes it as a digital communication space in which institutional meanings are represented, shared, and interpreted through everyday interactions. Through this perspective, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how educational institutions, particularly special education

schools, can construct distinctive brand identities by transforming authentic educational experiences into meaningful digital narratives.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how symbolic interaction is represented and interpreted through social media content in the construction of school brand identity. Following Bogdan and Taylor, as cited in Lexy, (2020), qualitative research generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken accounts and observable behaviors. This approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on understanding the meanings attached to educational activities and how these meanings were communicated through social media. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of promotional activities quantitatively, the research sought to explore how institutional values, educational practices, and school identity were represented through visual and textual content on Instagram.

A case study design was adopted to investigate the phenomenon within its specific institutional context. As explained by Yin, (2018), case studies are particularly relevant for examining contemporary phenomena in real-life settings, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly separated. The case examined in this study was the use of symbolic interaction in the construction of school brand identity through the Instagram account @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo. The analysis focused on how educational activities were selected, represented, and communicated through social media content, as well as how the meanings conveyed through these representations related to the institution's identity. Accordingly, Instagram posts were treated not merely as promotional materials but as symbolic representations of the school's educational values, activities, and institutional characteristics.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The informants consisted of the school principal, one IT staff member, two educators, and two parents of students. These participants were selected because they could provide different perspectives on the production, communication, and interpretation of the school's social media content. Observation focused on the Instagram account's published content, including its visual elements, captions, and representations of educational activities. Interviews explored the informants' experiences and perspectives regarding the school's social media practices, the values communicated through its content, and their perceptions of the school's identity. Documentation involved collecting relevant Instagram posts, photographs, captions, and institutional records that supported the analysis. Secondary data were obtained from relevant scholarly literature and institutional documents to provide conceptual and contextual support for interpreting the findings.

Data credibility was strengthened through triangulation, particularly source and method triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from the principal, IT staff member, educators, and parents to identify similarities and differences in their perspectives. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing interview accounts with observations of Instagram content and relevant documentary evidence. This process enabled

the researchers to examine whether the meanings expressed by informants were consistent with the symbols and messages represented in the school's social media publications. The collected data were analyzed descriptively by organizing the information, identifying recurring patterns and symbolic meanings, comparing perspectives across data sources, and interpreting how these meanings contributed to the construction of school brand identity. Through this process, the study sought to develop an interpretation grounded in the available empirical evidence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Special Needs Schools (SLB) are specialized educational institutions that serve children with special needs, such as hearing, vision, and mental development disorders. SLBs are spread across various regions in Indonesia, both in urban and rural areas, including the Demung-Situbondo area. Similar to SLBs in general, the primary function of SLB Negeri Demung is to provide education tailored to the needs of each student and help them develop independent living skills. Its primary goal is to improve students' quality of life by providing inclusive education and supporting their holistic development. This institution is a single institution that oversees SDLB and SMALB to help provide equal education for all children. SLB Negeri Demung's active social media presence is crucial to the school's promotional and marketing strategy. Through platforms such as its official website, Instagram, and Facebook, the SLB publishes relevant content, such as student achievements, school activities, and special programs. This not only increases the school's visibility but also builds a strong and positive brand identity in the eyes of the public, attracting the attention of prospective students and parents seeking a quality inclusive education.

1. Instagram as a means of symbolic interaction at Demung State Special Needs School

   Social media is an online medium where users can easily participate, share, and create various content without being limited by space and time. The Big Indonesian Dictionary defines it as information available through electronic media or products (KBBI, 2022). Social media can be used to distribute content as a means of documenting various existing content, such as profiles, information, reports, events, recordings of events, and research or study results. Content can be in the form of text, images, audio, and video. Integrating the distribution of relevant content on social media through various channels helps institutions interact symbolically with the public and also helps achieve the organization's vision, mission, and goals.

   Demung State Special School is recorded as having various social media, the official website of Demung State Special School can be accessed via https://slbndemung.sch.id/ From the page, the school also has an official account on Instagram @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo, the SLB Negeri Demung YouTube account and the school email slbndemung@gmail.com Each account on these social media platforms is independently managed by SLB Negeri Demung and is used specifically to showcase the

school's activities, as well as for communication and promotion. The consistent names of the platforms managed by SLB Negeri Demung indicate that the school aims to provide convenience and communicate that the school has equal access to social media, thus facilitating community interaction with the institution through shared content.

The program implemented by Demung State Special School (SLB Negeri Demung) aims to establish an independent school without discrimination, offering a variety of student skills activities, including batik making and gardening. This initiative should be leveraged to brand the school, highlighting its various active activities and student achievements, so that the community can recognize its excellence. Thus, social media facilitates school communication through symbolic interaction. This is consistent with findings by researchers, who found that social media can be a powerful promotional/branding tool.

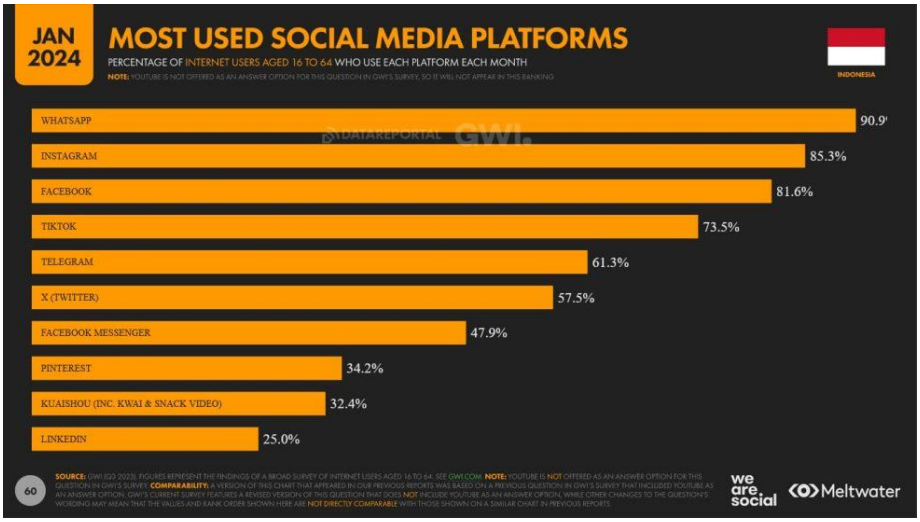

***Figure 1**: Social Media Usage Data in Indonesia in 2024 (Andi DR, 2024)*

The image above concludes that the use of social media in Indonesia is dominated by WhatsApp and Instagram users according to the data collection portal https://andi.link/hootsuite-we-are-social-data-digital-indonesia-2024/. SLB Negeri Demung in this case strives to optimize content not only on the institution's official website but also on the Instagram account @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo. Instagram is one of the social media that can be used as a promotional tool. Marketing content on social media is a form of symbolic interaction from the school that reflects the school's identity. By definition, symbolic interaction is a process of interaction in society about the human self that can produce symbols or meanings in verbal or nonverbal forms. In symbolic interaction itself, there are three important elements: Mind, Self, and Society.

*Mind*Mind or thought is described as an individual's ability to use symbols that have common social meanings in society. This understanding of symbols is detailed as follows: significant symbols, which are symbols that have the same meaning for many people, thought, and role-taking. Self or self is the ability to reflect on oneself from the perspective of others. In the looking-glass self, there is an understanding that humans learn about

themselves from how others treat, see, and label them. Society, in other words, is called culture or society. Each individual will behave according to the customs that have been established in that community. Society can be formed because of an agreement to implement agreed-upon rules and values. A special other or particular other is a certain individual who is considered important by oneself.

Social media has become a convenient search tool for the public. This allows educational institutions to make their brands widely known. The data in Figure 1, research found that Instagram is one of the social media applications that users access the most frequently compared to other social media platforms. Research from Google Analytics stated that subscribers of the Instagram account @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo spent the longest time accessing content on activities and searches for SLB Negeri Demung on Instagram.

2. Symbolic Interaction in Instagram Content Marketing @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo

One form of content marketing carried out by SLB Negeri Demung is by utilizing the Daily Activity technique where the public can access the activities owned by SLB Negeri Demung in the content distributed by @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo. This is in line with what was conveyed by the Informant In an interview with the principal of SLB Demung, it was explained that this school actively displays various activities on social media as a symbolic interaction effort to market the institution. The principal stated that they regularly upload photos and videos of student activities, such as skills competitions, art exhibitions, and events commemorating major holidays. According to the principal, this strategy not only increases the visibility and public awareness of SLB Negeri Demung, but also helps build a positive image and strengthen the institution's brand identity as an inclusive and high-achieving institution. The use of visual symbols and narratives in each post is also intended to arouse emotions and build stronger relationships with parents, prospective students, and the wider community.



Figure 2*Demung State Special School Social Media (source: @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo)*

Figure 2 shows the homepage and Instagram profile managed by SLB Negeri Demung @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo showing the profile of the Demung State Special School (SLB) with the motto "Independent, Innovative and Creative" the profile is equipped with a

schedule of teaching and learning activities from Monday to Friday along with the complete address of the school along with access links to other social media namely SLB Negeri Demung's YouTube. There are also school partners who help market works or products made by students with special needs, this shows symbolic interaction for the wider community which results in the perception of children with special needs being able to learn independently and creatively. Finally, the image above shows the Instagram Story @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo which publishes activities at the school, making it easier for the public to dig up school information and show the identity and culture of the school.

The Instagram profile picture of @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo demonstrates their efforts in using symbolic interaction to facilitate search and increase visibility on social media. The profile displays several key elements, such as the school logo containing symbols of inclusivity and special education, which visually reinforces their brand identity. With a description that includes important information such as address, operating hours, and collaborations with partners, the profile provides a comprehensive overview of the school. The use of various highlight stories, such as annual activities, degree shows, and creative projects, allows users to quickly access specific information and view recent activities. This is a form of symbolic interaction where each highlight story serves as a symbol of a specific aspect of school life, helping the audience build a better understanding of SLB Negeri Demung.

Furthermore, the number of posts, followers, and accounts followed also reflects the school's level of engagement and popularity on the platform. Thus, this profile not only facilitates easy search and navigation for users but also projects the image of an active, innovative, and connected school with the wider community. This approach strengthens SLB Demung's brand identity and increases its appeal to parents, prospective students, and the general public. The school principal (IFN) said:

> "We recognize the importance of social media in building a school's brand identity. Therefore, we regularly post about various student activities and school programs to enhance our identity as a school for children with special needs."



Figure 3.*Content in the form of Daily Activity (Source:@slb.negeri.demung.situbondo)*

From Figure 3 above, it explains the symbolic interaction in the form of the audio-visual content above which is distributed via Instagram accounts @slb.negeri.demung.situbondoThis content showcases the daily activities of students at Demung State Special Needs School. This also serves as a marketing tool for the educational institution.

The meaning contained in the content communicates the following:

First, Audio visual content uploaded by the Instagram account of SLB Negeri Demung@slb.negeri.demung.situbondoshows batik-making activities by students at a special needs high school (SMAB). The symbolic interaction approach is clearly visible in this documentation, where symbols such as batik and creative activities represent the school's values and identity, as a school that teaches independence to children with special needs. Through this upload, SLB Demung not only showcases students' artistic skills but also communicates their commitment to developing practical and creative skills. The symbol of batik in this context highlights Indonesia's rich cultural heritage, while the students' active participation demonstrates inclusivity and success in providing meaningful education. By documenting and sharing these daily activities, SLB Demung utilizes social media to market their institution, build a positive narrative, and strengthen their brand identity as an institution that supports the holistic development of students with special needs.

Second, Other content on the Instagram account @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo also shows students and teachers harvesting produce from the school garden at Demung State Special Needs School in Situbondo. From a symbolic interaction perspective, this activity symbolizes several important elements: sustainability, student engagement, and practice-based education. This documentation utilizes the symbols of the garden and harvest to represent school values, such as hard work, independence, and contextual learning.

By sharing these activities on social media, SLB Negeri Demung not only showcases the life skills programs they offer but also builds a positive narrative about the inclusivity and success of their students. The use of visual symbols within the context of these daily activities aims to attract the attention of parents, prospective students, and the wider community, further enhancing the institution's brand identity. It also demonstrates SLB Demung's commitment to providing a supportive and productive learning environment. As the school's IT staff (ACR) explained:

> "We frequently upload photos and videos of artistic activities such as batik-making, as this showcases our students' creative abilities and reflects the cultural values we teach."

The formation of brand identity through social media activities, as carried out by SLB Negeri Demung, is strengthened through documentation of daily activities that demonstrate a commitment to inclusive and creative education. Brand identity itself includes components such as values, mission, and vision that are integrated into every communication and interaction between the institution and the public. In the educational context, especially at inclusive schools like SLB Negeri Demung Situbondo, brand identity activities such as batik

making and gardening, shared through social media platforms, serve as symbols representing the values of independence, creativity, and inclusivity upheld by the school. Active engagement on social media can strengthen public perception of an educational institution's brand identity. In the case of SLB Negeri Demung Situbondo, posts showcasing student activities in an inclusive and productive environment build a positive image and enhance the school's reputation. Thus, consistent and targeted social media activity enables SLB Negeri Demung Situbondo to build and strengthen a brand identity that reflects its dedication to inclusive education and the holistic development of students.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Instagram functions not merely as a promotional medium for SLB Negeri Demung but also as a space for constructing and communicating institutional identity through symbolic interaction. The school's Instagram account, @slb.negeri.demung.situbondo, demonstrates how institutional values are communicated through visual representations, activity documentation, profile information, and narratives about students' daily experiences. Three interconnected aspects emerge from these findings: the use of Instagram as an institutional communication channel, the representation of school values through students' daily activities, and the construction of brand identity through consistent visual and symbolic communication. These findings suggest that social media marketing in special education institutions extends beyond increasing institutional visibility. It also provides opportunities to communicate educational values, demonstrate students' capabilities, and establish a recognizable institutional image within the wider community.

The use of Instagram as an institutional communication channel reflects a shift in how educational institutions establish relationships with their surrounding communities. The official profile, institutional logo, school motto, contact information, activity schedules, and links to other digital platforms function as interconnected communication elements that facilitate public access to institutional information. These elements are not simply administrative features but also represent how the school introduces itself and establishes its position in the digital environment. In this context, Instagram becomes a communication space through which the institution presents its organizational characteristics and facilitates public engagement (Fajriyah et al., 2026; Ibrahimy et al., 2024). This interpretation supports the argument that social media can strengthen institutional promotion and branding when communication is organized around recognizable institutional characteristics. However, the significance of this finding lies not only in the availability of digital platforms but also in how institutional information is presented as a coherent representation of the school's identity.

The documentation of students' daily activities further demonstrates how symbolic interaction operates through visual content. Activities such as batik-making and gardening communicate meanings that extend beyond the activities themselves. Batik-making, for

example, represents creativity, cultural appreciation, practical skills, and opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities. Similarly, gardening and harvesting activities communicate independence, responsibility, productive engagement, and experiential learning (Costenbader et al., 2025; Tao et al., 2026). These activities become meaningful institutional symbols because they represent educational values that the school seeks to communicate to the public. Rather than presenting students with special needs primarily through their limitations, the content emphasizes their participation, capabilities, and achievements. This representation is important because institutional communication can influence how audiences understand the educational potential of students with special needs. Consequently, daily activity content becomes a means of presenting an alternative institutional narrative that emphasizes ability, participation, and inclusion.

This finding can be further interpreted through the symbolic interaction perspective, particularly the concepts of mind, self, and society developed within the tradition of symbolic interactionism. The concept of mind helps explain how visual representations acquire meaning through shared social understandings. For example, batik-making and gardening are not merely images of school activities; they communicate recognizable meanings associated with creativity, independence, productivity, and cultural values. The concept of self becomes relevant when the school presents students through their activities and achievements, allowing their institutional representation to move beyond conventional assumptions about disability (Bin Hasan et al., 2024; Li & Chen, 2024). Meanwhile, the concept of society highlights the role of shared cultural values and social expectations in shaping how the public interprets these representations. These three dimensions demonstrate that Instagram content is not simply a collection of promotional materials but a process of constructing and communicating meaning between the institution and its audiences.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the formation of institutional brand identity depends on the relationship between the symbols presented and the values consistently communicated through social media. The school's motto, institutional profile, student activities, and visual documentation collectively construct an image of SLB Negeri Demung as an institution that promotes independence, innovation, creativity, and inclusive education. This is consistent with the understanding that brand identity encompasses institutional values, vision, mission, and the characteristics communicated through organizational interactions (Mundiri et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the contribution of Instagram content is not limited to displaying these institutional characteristics. Its greater significance lies in translating abstract educational values into visible representations that can be understood by the public. When students' activities consistently demonstrate the values promoted by the institution, social media content provides concrete illustrations of the school's educational orientation. In this regard, the relationship between symbolic interaction and brand identity becomes evident through the

process of translating institutional values into recognizable visual and narrative representations.

Another important aspect concerns the relationship between content consistency and institutional credibility. The findings show that SLB Negeri Demung uses daily activity documentation to communicate its educational programs and institutional characteristics. The principal's explanation indicates that publishing student activities, competitions, art exhibitions, and commemorative events is intended to increase institutional visibility and establish a positive image. Similarly, the IT staff's explanation emphasizes the importance of documenting artistic activities to communicate students' creative abilities and the cultural values developed through school programs. These accounts demonstrate that content production is connected to the institution's intention to communicate its educational identity. However, consistency should not be understood merely as the frequency of uploading content (Maulana et al., 2025). It also involves maintaining alignment between the messages communicated, the activities actually implemented, and the institutional values represented. This interpretation reinforces the importance of strategic social media communication in developing a recognizable and credible institutional brand.

The contribution of this study lies in connecting symbolic interaction with social media content marketing in the context of special education institutions. Previous discussions of social media promotion have generally emphasized its function in increasing visibility, attracting audiences, and strengthening organizational branding. This study extends that perspective by demonstrating how everyday educational activities can operate as symbolic representations through which institutional identity is communicated. In the context of SLB Negeri Demung, batik-making, gardening, student participation, and institutional communication elements become meaningful representations of inclusive education. The distinctive contribution is therefore not simply the use of Instagram as a promotional platform, but the explanation of how educational activities are transformed into institutional symbols that communicate values and shape the narrative surrounding students with special needs. This perspective provides an opportunity to understand educational branding as a meaning-making process rather than merely a promotional activity.

These findings also have practical implications for the management of social media in special education institutions. School leaders and digital communication administrators need to develop content strategies that connect institutional values with concrete educational practices. Student activities, achievements, creative products, and collaborative programs can be documented as evidence of the institution's educational commitment. However, content development should avoid presenting students merely as promotional objects. Their dignity, participation, individual capabilities, and privacy must remain central considerations in the communication process. Furthermore, institutions need to maintain consistency between their digital representations and actual educational practices. Such alignment is important because

institutional branding should reflect the educational experiences provided by the school rather than rely exclusively on attractive visual presentations. Accordingly, Instagram management can become part of institutional communication and strategic branding rather than functioning only as an informal documentation activity.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research focuses on one special education institution, namely SLB Negeri Demung, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other educational institutions with different organizational characteristics and digital communication practices. Second, the analysis primarily examines institutional content and the meanings communicated through Instagram, while the actual interpretations and responses of parents, prospective students, and the wider community have not been sufficiently explored. Therefore, the study cannot conclusively establish whether the symbolic messages communicated by the school produce corresponding changes in public perceptions or institutional reputation. Third, the analysis emphasizes visual and narrative representations without examining in greater depth the relationship between content characteristics and audience engagement. Future research could address these limitations by involving multiple special education institutions, examining audience interpretations through interviews or focus group discussions, and investigating how institutional content influences public perceptions and engagement. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how symbolic interaction contributes to educational branding in digital environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that symbolic interaction through Instagram plays an important role in constructing and communicating the brand identity of SLB Negeri Demung Situbondo. The findings demonstrate that the school's social media content functions beyond institutional promotion by translating educational values into visual and narrative representations that can be recognized by the public. Through the documentation of students' daily activities, particularly batik-making and gardening, the school communicates its commitment to independence, creativity, and inclusive education. These activities serve as symbolic representations of students' abilities and educational experiences, allowing the institution to present an identity that emphasizes participation, productivity, and potential rather than limitations. Accordingly, Instagram becomes a medium through which institutional values are displayed, interpreted, and communicated as part of the school's public identity.

Furthermore, this study highlights that the strength of educational brand identity depends not merely on the frequency of social media publications but also on the consistency and meaningfulness of the symbols communicated. The integration of institutional profiles, educational activities, student achievements, and visual narratives provides a coherent representation of the school's identity and educational orientation. Theoretically, these findings extend the application of symbolic interactionism to educational social media marketing by

demonstrating how everyday school activities can be transformed into meaningful symbols for institutional identity construction. Practically, special education institutions can utilize social media more strategically by presenting authentic student experiences and educational achievements while maintaining the dignity, privacy, and participation of students. Therefore, social media marketing should be understood not simply as a promotional strategy but as an ongoing process of communicating institutional values and establishing a recognizable identity in the digital environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the principal, teachers, and staff of SLB Negeri Demung Situbondo for their valuable support, cooperation, and willingness to provide information throughout the research process. Special appreciation is also extended to all parties who contributed to the completion of this study. Their assistance and contributions were essential in facilitating the research and providing insights into the use of Instagram as a medium for symbolic interaction and institutional brand identity development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Awaliah S, N. R., Muhaeminah, U., & Munawwaroh, I. (2025). *The Role of Digital Marketing Management in Improving College Branding on Social Media*. *01*(02), 75–86. https://doi.org/10.61987/ijpp.v1i2.1258

Bin Hasan, K. M., Sajid, M., Lapina, M. A., Shahid, M., & Kotecha, K. (2024). Blockchain technology meets 6 G wireless networks: A systematic survey. *Alexandria Engineering Journal*, *92*(February), 199–220. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aej.2024.02.031

Ceccarelli, S., Cesta, A., Cortellessa, G., De Benedictis, R., Fracasso, F., Leopardi, L., Ligios, L., Lombardi, E., Malatesta, S. G., Oddi, A., Pagano, A., Palombini, A., Romagna, G., Sanzari, M., & Schaerf, M. (2024). Evaluating visitors' experience in museum: Comparing artificial intelligence and multi-partitioned analysis. *Digital Applications in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, *33*(April), e00340. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.daach.2024.e00340

Costenbader, E., Memmott, C., Litvin, K., Green, M., Mba-Oduwusi, N., Offiaeli, I., & Hajeebhoy, N. (2025). Gendered Social Norms, Exceptions, and Sanctions: Implications for Maternal, Infant, and Young Child Nutrition in Nigeria. *Current Developments in Nutrition*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cdnut.2024.104524

Fajriyah, N., Munawwaroh, I., Sain, S. H., Jadid, U. N., Java, E., & Office, B. H. (2026). Beyond Inclusion : Uncovering The Role of Inclusive Learning in Shaping Students'. *PEDAGOGIK: Jurnal Pendidikan*, *13*(1), 81–98. https://doi.org/10.33650/pjp.v13i1.13871

Falah, M. R. F., & Wibowo, A. (2023). Communication In Pesantren Educational Institutions: The Application Of Social Cognitive Theory In Understanding Social Interaction In The Pesantren Environment. *Mapendis: Jurnal ...*, *01*(02), 18–28. https://doi.org/10.30997/jtm.v

Fitri, A. Z. (2022). Inclusive Education Curriculum Management with Modification Humanistic Design. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, *13*(3), 150–173.

Geletu, G. M., & Mihiretie, D. M. (2023). Professional accountability and responsibility of learning communities of practice in professional development versus curriculum practice in classrooms: Possibilities and pathways. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, *4*(July 2022), 100223. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100223

Heru, M. J. A., & Bali, M. M. E. I. (2024). Crafting Leaders in the Digital Age: How Adaptive Management Strategies Revolutionize Leadership Development in Islamic Schools. *Communautaire: Journal of Community Service*, *3*(1), 79–92. https://doi.org/10.61987/communautaire.v3i1.458

Husnan, R. (2023). Implementation Of Public Relations Management In Building Public Trust At Luqman Al-Hakim Primary School In Jember. *JIEMAN: Journal of Islamic Educational Management*, *5*(1), 117–128. https://doi.org/10.35719/jieman.v5i1.187

Ibrahimy, M. M., Norta, A., & Normak, P. (2024). Blockchain-based governance models supporting corruption-transparency: A systematic literature review. *Blockchain: Research and Applications*, *5*(2), 100186. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bcra.2023.100186

Lexy, j moelong. (2020). *metode penelitian kualitatif*. Remaja Rosdakarya.

Li, W., & Chen, J. (2024). From brussels effect to gravity assists: Understanding the evolution of the GDPR-inspired personal information protection law in China. *Computer Law and Security Review*, *54*(April 2016), 105994. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2024.105994

Lippens, L., Dalle, A., D'hondt, F., Verhaeghe, P. P., & Baert, S. (2023). Understanding ethnic hiring discrimination: A contextual analysis of experimental evidence. *Labour Economics*, *85*(April 2022), 102453. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2023.102453

Maulana, M. Z., Mannan, A. F., Shulhani, R., Baharun, H., & Supardi, S. (2025). Integrating Technology-Based Public Relations to Improve Brand Identity in Islamic Boarding Schools. *Journal of Asian Islamic Educational Management (JAIEM)*, *3*(1), 9–16. https://doi.org/10.53889/jaiem.v3i1.586

Mundiri, A., Munawwaroh, I., Hadi, M. I., Baharun, H., Shudiq, W. J. F., & Maulidy, A. (2025). Artificial Intelligence (AI) Innovation in Education: From Data-Driven Learning to Automated Teaching. *Proceedings of the 2025 IEEE International Conference on Industry 4.0, Artificial Intelligence, and Communications Technology, IAICT 2025*, 173–180. https://doi.org/10.1109/IAICT65714.2025.11100623

Rahmawati, Y., Hariyati, F., Abdullah, A. Z., & Nurmiarani, M. (2024). Gaya Komunikasi Dakwah Era Digital: Kajian Literatur. *Concept: Journal of Social Humanities and Education*, *3*(1), 266–279. https://doi.org/10.55606/concept.v3i1.1081

Shams, R., Chatterjee, S., & Chaudhuri, R. (2024). Developing brand identity and sales strategy in the digital era: Moderating role of consumer belief in brand. *Journal of Business Research*, *179*(March), 114689. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114689

Sumanti, S. T., Nunzairina, & Salminawati. (2024). The Evolution of Islamic Educational Institutions in North Sumatra Indonesia. *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, *7*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i1.4419

Tao, S., Lan, M., Wang, M., & Li, H. (2026). Potential risks of generative artificial intelligence integration into K-12 education: A scoping review. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, *10*(December 2025), 100561. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2026.100561

Tsauri, S., Husnan, R., & Sain, Z. H. (2024). *Optimizing Press Agentry for Strategic Visibility in Educational Based on Pesantren*. *6*(2), 47–62.

Ubaidillah, U., & Mundiri, A. (2023). Empowering Teacher Competence through Guidance in Religion-Moderated Literacy. *GEMEINSCHAFT: Journal of Social and Community Engagement*, *1*(1), 37–49.

Wibowo, A., & Rizal, H. (2023). *Building the Pesantren Reputation : Implementation of Inbound Marketing Introduction In this increasingly growing era of globalization , education is a determining factor in forming a cultured , civilized society with a deep understanding of religion and* . *13*(3), 231–249. https://doi.org/10.33367/ji.v13i3.4540

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. SAGE.