



Building Brand Image through Innovative Principal Leadership: A Case Study of State Junior High School 35, Tebo, Indonesia

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Abstrak: Increasing competition among junior high schools necessitates that principals employ innovative strategies to establish a positive brand image. SMP Negeri 35 in Tebo Regency faces persistent challenges, including declining new student enrollment over the past three years, limited facilities and infrastructure, and a less strategic location. This study analyzes the principal's innovative leadership in enhancing brand image, examines supporting and inhibiting factors, and evaluates innovation effectiveness. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were gathered through observation, interviews with the principal, vice principals, and teachers, and document analysis, followed by thematic analysis to identify innovation patterns and influencing factors. Findings indicate that innovations include improving academic and non-academic achievements, upgrading facilities and infrastructure, implementing a Green School program, promoting active-creative-enjoyable learning, integrating educational technology, digitalizing school promotion, and fostering alumni development to secure admission to prestigious higher-level schools. These initiatives have positively influenced the school's image but remain constrained by budget limitations, inadequate internet connectivity, and modest student numbers. Supporting factors comprise the principal's commitment and active participation from the school community, while obstacles involve limited resources, suboptimal facilities, and location disadvantages. Overall, innovative leadership strengthens brand image but has not fully reversed declining enrollment. The study recommends enhanced local government support through improved infrastructure, expanded digital promotion, and leadership innovation training for schools in rural or remote areas. This innovation model offers a practical framework for other schools confronting similar contextual constraints in building a competitive brand image.

Keywords: Innovative Leadership, School Principal, Brand Image, Junior High School, Rural School

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental need for every individual to develop their potential and to shape high-quality human resources. Well-planned and systematically managed education can create a conducive learning environment, enabling students to develop cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities optimally (Umam, 2023). Law No. 20 of 2003 emphasizes that education is a conscious and deliberate effort to create a learning atmosphere in which students actively develop their potential. In the context of increasingly intense educational competition, institutions must maintain and enhance the quality of educational services to remain attractive to the public (Muljawan, 2019). As formal educational institutions, schools play a pivotal role in shaping students' character, skills, and knowledge (Rahman, 2021). Consequently, a school's success in attracting prospective students largely depends on the positive image it holds in the public eye.

The variable of brand image is the primary focus of this research because it is directly related to public perceptions of school quality. A strong brand image can enhance public trust, attract prospective students, and serve as a competitive advantage in a crowded educational landscape (Rukmana, 2016). In education, brand image is shaped by the school's reputation, service quality, academic and non-academic achievements, and the uniqueness of the programs offered (Manurung, 2021). The leadership of the school principal is the second variable chosen, as the principal plays a central role in managing and directing strategies to build a positive institutional image (Sagala, 2018; Muspawi, 2020). Innovative leadership can mobilize all school resources to achieve strategic goals, including strengthening the brand image within the community (Habe et al., 2022). This strong correlation between innovative leadership and brand image underpins the selection of variables in this study.

Previous research has examined the leadership of school principals and brand image in various contexts. Salamah (2024) highlights how madrasah principals build brand image through improved learning quality and school management. Wibowo (2018) discusses strategies for enhancing brand image to boost institutional competitiveness, emphasizing integrated marketing strategies. Wijaya (2020) demonstrates that leadership innovation fostering teacher–student collaboration positively impacts educational quality and school appeal. Similarly, Manurung (2021) confirms that a positive educational image results from a combination of academic quality, facilities, and effective promotional strategies. However, studies linking innovative school leadership to brand image development within the context of junior high schools in remote areas remain limited—pointing to a research gap that this study aims to fill.

This article contributes by providing an in-depth analysis of the principal's leadership innovations in building the brand image of SMP Negeri 35 in Tebo Regency—a rural public school facing geographical challenges and resource limitations. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on innovative strategies implemented under conditions of limited facilities, low student numbers, and competition from neighboring schools. Unlike previous studies that primarily explore urban schools or madrasahs, this study emphasizes rural junior high schools dealing with structural and social barriers. This is a significant research gap because strategies effective in rural contexts may differ substantially from

those in urban settings. Accordingly, the research seeks to answer three main questions: What forms of leadership innovation are practiced? What are the supporting and inhibiting factors? And how effective are these innovations in improving the school's brand image in SMP Negeri 35, Tebo Regency, Indonesia?

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of innovative school leadership in enhancing brand image (Creswell, 2018). The research subjects consisted of eight informants: one principal as the key informant, two vice principals, and five teachers as supporting informants. The selection of informants was conducted using purposive sampling, based on their active involvement in the planning and implementation of school innovations. Data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by open-ended questions, participant observation of school activities, and document analysis. The interviews explored informants' views and experiences, observation was used to verify interview findings, and documentation supplemented information related to school policies and programs. All collected data served as the basis for an in-depth analysis of the principal's leadership strategies.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic coding to identify relevant patterns and themes, following stages including data familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting (Emzir, 2014). This process began with verbatim transcription of interviews, followed by manual coding to identify indicators aligned with the research objectives. Themes generated from the coding were compared with observation and documentation data to ensure consistency. Data validation was carried out through source and technique triangulation, comparing interview, observation, and documentation results. Additionally, member checks were conducted by seeking clarification and confirmation from informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations aligned with the field reality. These steps ensured the academic validity and reliability of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Innovative Principal Leadership in Enhancing Brand Image

The transformation of educational leadership in the contemporary era demands a new paradigm in the management of educational institutions. The concept of innovative leadership, as articulated by Harahap (2023), represents the fundamental ability of a leader to identify, analyze, and implement progressive ideas within the context of organizational management. This innovation dimension is not limited to operational and technical aspects but encompasses a broader spectrum, including strategic thinking, a transformative vision, and the capacity to plan and direct sustainable innovative initiatives within the structure of public institutions.

Brand image, in the context of education, has become a fundamental element that determines public perception of the quality and reputation of educational institutions (Kotler and Fox, 2020). The concept of brand image is not merely

confined to visual or symbolic aspects but encompasses the entirety of stakeholder experiences and perceptions of the values, quality, and unique characteristics possessed by an educational institution. In the global context, creating a strong brand identity is vital for success. The distinctive image and reputation of a school can be remarkably strong, indicating that brand image is a crucial factor in the competitiveness of educational institutions.

In the context of education, particularly within formal institutions, the urgency of innovation as a strategic instrument for shaping public perception and institutional reputation is undeniable. Salamah (2024) emphasizes that the perceptual value constructed by society toward an educational institution—manifested in the form of an image or brand image—becomes a critical determinant in the level of community engagement and participation. This phenomenon creates a positive correlation between the quality of institutional image and the intensity of public interest and trust, which in turn influences the attractiveness and competitiveness of a school in recruiting new students.

The implementation of leadership innovations at SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency, Jambi Province, demonstrates multidimensional characteristics in efforts to construct a positive institutional image. The leadership strategies developed are not merely oriented toward conventional administrative aspects but instead integrate a holistic approach encompassing program diversification, resource optimization, and organizational capacity development. This approach aims to create competitive differentiation capable of attracting the attention of external stakeholders, particularly prospective students, parents, and the wider community.

Strategies for Improving Academic and Non-Academic Achievement

The first dimension in the implementation of leadership innovation focuses on optimizing student achievement in both academic and non-academic domains. The achievement development paradigm implemented at SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency reflects a comprehensive understanding of brand image as a construct shaped by public perception. As articulated in the research findings, brand image functions as a distinctive identity that differentiates one educational institution from another, while also serving as a magnetic factor that draws the attention of prospective students and influences their school choice preferences.

The implementation of achievement enhancement strategies demonstrates characteristics of participatory and collaborative leadership. Based on an interview with the Principal (SB), he stated:

“The innovative leadership of the principal at SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency in improving students’ academic and non-academic achievements has been implemented, and the principal does not force or impose but provides teachers and students with the freedom to develop creativity; teachers and students participate voluntarily, and through this cooperation the school’s positive image improves little by little.”
(Interview, July 22, 2024)

The principal does not adopt a rigid, directive approach but instead grants teachers and students the autonomy and space to explore their creative potential. This collaborative dynamic fosters organizational synergy, enabling spontaneous participation from all school components without coercion or structural pressure.

Empirical findings indicate that this innovative approach has successfully created a conducive atmosphere supporting the school's optimal development and the maximization of student potential. The principal consistently encourages teachers to implement methodological innovations in the learning process, while also providing platforms for students to develop their abilities through extracurricular activities and competitions.

Theoretical validation for these findings can be found in the research of Wijaya (2020), which demonstrates that leadership innovations facilitating collaboration between teachers and students have a significant impact on improving educational quality and building distinctive institutional characteristics. Furthermore, the study confirms that leadership innovation that provides room for self-development through extracurricular activities proves effective in increasing a school's appeal to prospective students.

Recent studies also indicate that educational leadership plays a crucial role in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship in education (Rashid et al., 2024). This research emphasizes the importance of adaptive and responsive leadership to changes in the educational environment in order to achieve competitive advantage.

Optimization of Learning Facilities and Infrastructure

The second dimension in the leadership innovation framework concerns systematic efforts to optimize the completeness and quality of learning facilities and infrastructure. The approach adopted by the principal in this context demonstrates a strategic understanding of the correlation between the quality of educational infrastructure and the effectiveness of the learning process.

The methodology implemented began with a comprehensive audit to identify deficiencies in existing facilities, including classrooms, laboratories, and learning equipment. Based on an interview with the Vice Principal (WA), he explained:

“The first step taken was data collection to determine deficiencies in facilities and infrastructure, such as classrooms, laboratories, and learning tools. The principal emphasized the importance of innovation, communication, and the involvement of all parties—teachers, parents, and the community—to collectively meet the school's needs gradually.”
(Interview, July 23, 2024)

This identification process became the basis for formulating a structured and targeted infrastructure development strategy. The principal stressed the importance of innovation, effective communication, and multi-stakeholder involvement—including teachers, parents, and the community—in collectively fulfilling infrastructure needs over time.

The principal's innovative orientation is manifested in proactive efforts to identify and leverage partnership opportunities with various external institutions, including educational institutions, the corporate sector, and the government. These partnerships aim to acquire essential learning facilities such as computers, laboratories, and practical tools. This approach demonstrates leadership capacity that extends beyond pedagogical aspects to include managerial dimensions in providing infrastructure that supports learning quality.

However, the implementation of this strategy faces significant constraints. Empirical findings indicate that the condition of facilities and infrastructure at

SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency remains inadequate, perceived as a consequence of limited government budget allocation for the institution. This condition is exacerbated by the deterioration of existing facilities, requiring intensive rehabilitation and maintenance.

These findings resonate with the study of Fidiyawati (2018), which identified that maintenance of educational facilities and infrastructure has not been optimal, with negative implications for the quality of the learning process. The research also confirmed that financial and human resource limitations are major obstacles in the maintenance and development of educational facilities.

ASRI Environmental Program and Green School

The third dimension in the implementation of leadership innovation is manifested in the development of the ASRI Environmental Program or Green School, reflecting institutional commitment to sustainable education and ecological awareness. This program demonstrates a progressive leadership vision, not only oriented toward conventional academic achievement but also toward the formation of student character and environmental awareness.

The “Green School” program is a national-level environmental project implemented in every primary school. Its primary goal is to create a community that approximates biodiversity in a sustainable and safe manner, achieved by positively influencing children’s behavior toward the environment (Pinas et al., 2016). The philosophy of this program rests on the premise that environmental education cannot be limited to the transmission of theoretical knowledge but must be integrated into students’ everyday practices. Based on an interview with the Principal (SB), he stated:

“This innovation is one of the best-functioning innovations according to me because it has been a school commitment from the beginning; the practices carried out in the field produce results that will later be used by the school as emergency funds. We have planted pinang trees whose fruit is sold, cassava that is processed into chips for sale, and teak trees whose wood is used for school renovations.” (Interview, July 22, 2024)

Through the implementation of the Green School program, students not only gain conceptual understanding of environmental conservation but also develop an environmentally friendly lifestyle habitus in their daily activities.

A teacher at SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency (WA) also confirmed the program’s success:

“The Green School program in our school has been running well. This environmentally friendly program has become a priority here. We also involve teachers and students in various environmental activities, such as school clean-up actions and planting trees that will bear fruit. Everyone is willing to cooperate and work together to preserve the environment.” (Interview, July 23, 2024)

The program’s expectations include the transfer of environmental values and practices from the school context to students’ home environments, so that the benefits extend beyond the school to their families and surrounding communities. This diffusion strategy reflects a systemic understanding of education as a broader agent of social change. Evaluation of the program’s sustainability shows encouraging results. The school has successfully harvested various crops,

including pinang, cassava, and teak. This diversification of yields not only provides added value in the form of additional income but also creates practical learning about agricultural sustainability and the economic value of environmental conservation.

The monetization of program results is carried out through the sale of pinang fruit, also used for medicinal purposes, the processing and sale of cassava products, and the use of teak wood for school infrastructure renovation. Revenue generated from these activities is allocated to the school's emergency fund, used to support student activities, including competitions and extracurricular programs.

The geographical context of this program shows strategic adaptation to local conditions. The school's location near oil palm plantations and its extensive land create optimal opportunities for greening programs. Although restrictions exist on planting oil palm because of the school's location within existing plantation areas, diversification into crops such as pinang and teak has proven viable and productive. The significance of the Green School program extends beyond environmental and economic benefits, encompassing broader social impacts. The program creates a comfortable learning environment while contributing to comprehensive environmental conservation efforts. Positive impacts also reach the surrounding community, as confirmed by Nurwanto (2020), who demonstrated that the implementation of the Green School program not only creates a conducive learning environment but also supports wider environmental conservation, increases public awareness of the importance of preserving natural resources, and contributes to creating a healthier environment.

Recent research on green education highlights its important role in promoting sustainable development by equipping individuals with relevant knowledge, skills, and values (Rahman, 2023), supporting the findings of this study on the importance of integrating environmental education into the formal education system.

Productive, Active, Creative, Effective, and Enjoyable Learning

The fourth dimension within the leadership innovation framework relates to the transformation of learning methodologies toward a more dynamic, interactive, and engaging paradigm. An analysis of teacher competence at SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency indicates a high level of professionalism, which is not only limited to mastery of theoretical knowledge but also includes the capacity to deliver material in an engaging and effective manner. Based on an interview with a teacher (MA), she explained:

“The teachers at SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency have very good competencies. They not only understand theory in depth but are also able to present material in an engaging and effective way, so that students find it easier to understand, remain enthusiastic, and are motivated in learning. In addition, they are responsive to technological developments, utilizing various tools and applications to support the learning process in class.” (Interview, July 24, 2024)

The teachers' pedagogical competence is manifested in their ability to create a stimulating learning experience that facilitates student understanding while maintaining enthusiasm and motivation for learning. Their adaptability to technological developments also shows progressiveness in using various tools and

applications to support the classroom learning process. The learning innovations implemented are not limited to the adoption of technology but also include creative methodologies that encourage active student participation. The Principal (SB) stated in an interview:

“Learning innovation in this school is not limited to the application of technology but also involves creative methods that encourage active student participation. Examples include active group discussions and simulations that help students understand concepts more easily, so they are not just passive listeners but actively involved in learning activities.”
(Interview, July 22, 2024)

The learning strategies include dynamic group discussions as well as simulations that facilitate deeper conceptual understanding, enabling students to move beyond the role of passive recipients to become active participants in the learning process. The pedagogical approach adopted is contextual or situational, integrating various creative methodologies to ensure that students not only gain theoretical understanding but also develop the capacity for practical application. One of the strategies implemented is project-based learning with an environmental focus, in which students are directly involved in real-world activities in the field, transcending the traditional lecture-based approach.

This pedagogical orientation aims to create productive, creative, and confident learners who have the courage to create and innovate. This approach reflects a comprehensive understanding of learning as the active construction of knowledge rather than the passive absorption of information.

Empirical validation of teaching quality shows a satisfactory standard, indicated by the teachers’ serious commitment to improving student capabilities. Evaluation of teaching quality covers multiple dimensions: teacher competence and knowledge, the implementation of innovative methodologies, positive teacher–student interactions, and comprehensive learning assessment approaches.

These findings are in line with Afwan’s (2020) study, which analyzed the quality of teachers’ innovative thinking at SMA Negeri 1 Kayan Hilir. The study found that the average quality of teachers’ innovative thinking reached 76.02, categorized at a good level, confirming the importance of innovative pedagogical thinking in improving educational quality.

Producing Quality Graduates for Competition in Further Education

The fifth dimension within the strategic framework of leadership innovation concerns systematic efforts to produce quality graduates who are capable of competing in the admission process for prestigious continuing schools. The approach adopted by the principal reflects a comprehensive understanding of the correlation between graduate quality and institutional brand image.

Based on an interview with the Principal (SB), he explained a comprehensive strategy for preparing graduates:

“The principal strives to improve the school’s image by paying special attention to graduate quality. There is an intensive guidance program for students who want to continue to favorite schools, such as additional lessons for entrance exams and small group discussions. This program aims not only to improve students’ academic scores but also to prepare

their mental strength and other abilities needed to succeed in facing competition in further education.” (Interview, July 22, 2024)

The strategic approach includes the implementation of intensive guidance programs for students aspiring to prestigious schools, including additional tutoring sessions for entrance examinations and small group discussions. The program is designed not only to improve academic performance but also to prepare mental readiness and other competencies essential for success in competitive higher education environments. The leadership philosophy articulated by the principal emphasizes that the school’s mission is not limited to producing graduates with academic excellence but also to forming students’ strong and resilient character. The Principal (SB) affirmed:

“The principal emphasizes that the school’s mission is not only to produce graduates with good academic scores but also to shape students’ strong and resilient character. The principal hopes that graduates can face competition in an increasingly competitive world with strong mental fortitude and good capabilities.” (Interview, July 22, 2024)

Evaluation of the program’s effectiveness shows positive outcomes, with a significant number of students successfully admitted to prestigious schools at both local and national levels. This success is attributed to innovative approaches that focus not only on achieving high scores but also on comprehensive character development, preparing students for the challenges of higher education. A teacher (MA) at SMP Negeri 35 confirmed the success of this program:

“The innovations implemented by the principal play an important role in improving graduate quality. The innovations focus not only on achieving high scores but also on shaping students’ character so that they are ready to face challenges at higher education levels. Thanks to these innovations, many students have successfully entered favorite continuation schools.” (Interview, July 24, 2024)

The principal’s continuous professional development in monitoring educational trends enables optimal preparation of students for competition in increasingly competitive educational environments. Strategic partnerships with continuation schools have also been established to ensure that graduates have adequate preparation in line with required standards. Theoretical validation can be found in Afifah’s (2024) study, which examined the influence of career guidance services on continuation school selection among ninth-grade students. The results showed that career guidance services had a significant influence of 39.8% on students’ decisions in selecting continuation schools.

Integration of Technology in Learning

The sixth dimension in the innovation framework relates to the strategic integration of technology into educational processes. The principal’s recognition of the criticality of technology utilization in the digital era reflects a progressive understanding of technological transformation within educational contexts. Based on an interview with the Principal (SB), he outlined his vision for technology in education:

“The principal realizes the importance of utilizing technology in the digital era to improve the teaching and learning process; this technology can be optimized to improve the quality of learning, not merely as an

additional tool without significant impact. The principal understands the importance of digitalization in learning to help teachers deliver material to students so they do not easily get bored.” (Interview, July 22, 2024)

This utilization is oriented toward optimizing learning quality rather than merely serving as a supplementary tool without significant impact. The principal’s understanding of the importance of digitalization in learning aims to assist teachers in delivering material so that students remain engaged and avoid boredom. The school’s technological implementation includes the use of laptops, projectors, online quizzes, and instructional videos. This integration creates more enthusiastic, interested, and engaged students while facilitating material comprehension through attractive methodologies. A teacher (MA) explained in an interview:

“Technology has been used in the school to support the teaching and learning process, such as using laptops, projectors, online quizzes, and learning videos. This technology makes students more enthusiastic, interested, and less easily bored, while also helping them understand the material in an engaging way.” (Interview, July 24, 2024)

Technology plays a crucial role in making learning materials more appealing and helping teachers deliver content through more innovative approaches. However, challenges emerge in teachers’ adaptation to technology, as some still require training to utilize it optimally in teaching. Empirical investigation indicates that the school has not yet fully utilized technology in learning, with limited implementation frequency. Although the school is equipped with advanced technology such as laptops and projectors, usage is primarily limited to practical sessions and presentations rather than daily instructional integration.

This is consistent with Suryani’s (2020) research, which confirms that although schools are equipped with technological devices, utilization has not been maximized. In many cases, technology is only used for practical activities or presentations, with limited application in routine teaching practices.

Digitalization for Promotional Activities

The seventh dimension in the comprehensive innovation strategy focuses on leveraging digital platforms for institutional promotion and community outreach. The principal’s recognition of the importance of digital technology in the contemporary era reflects a strategic understanding of digital marketing potential within educational contexts. Based on an interview with the Principal (SB), he explained the school’s digitalization strategy:

“The principal realizes the importance of utilizing technology in the digital era to introduce the school to more people. By using media, the school can share activities, student achievements, and new programs, making it easier for parents and the community to know what is happening at the school.” (Interview, July 22, 2024)

Through the use of digital media, the school can share activities, student achievements, and new programs, making it easier for parents and the community to obtain information about the school. Current implementation primarily uses Facebook, with Instagram experiencing temporary blocking issues; nevertheless, the school remains committed to making optimal use of available social media

platforms for broader community outreach. A teacher (MA) emphasized the role of digitalization:

“Teachers feel that digitalization plays a significant role in introducing the school and making it easier for parents and the community to access information about the school. The school routinely shares activities, student achievements, and ongoing programs through social media, enabling parents and the community to obtain information without having to come directly to the school.” (Interview, July 24, 2024)

Teachers perceive digitalization as instrumental in introducing the school and facilitating access to information for parents and the community. Regular sharing of content—activities, student achievements, and ongoing programs—through social media enables the public to stay informed without physical visits.

Empirical findings indicate progressive adoption of digitalization as a promotional tool. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram serve as primary means for disseminating information. Through these platforms, the school shares various activities, student achievements, and featured programs currently being implemented. Challenges include the blocking of the school’s Instagram account, shifting the promotional focus primarily to Facebook. Nevertheless, the school continues efforts to utilize available social media platforms optimally to achieve broader community reach.

This aligns with Iskandar’s (2021) research, which confirms that social media use in educational contexts can enhance school visibility and expand promotional outreach to the broader community, strengthening institutional recognition and community engagement.

Analysis of Innovation Effectiveness

The eighth dimension within the innovation framework relates to the comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of leadership innovations in strengthening the school’s brand image. Empirical data reveal that these innovations have produced positive impacts across multiple domains, including the enhancement of academic and non-academic achievements, the improvement of facilities and infrastructure, and the cultivation of an environmentally conscious school culture.

However, the implementation of these innovations has not yet yielded optimal results, as indicated by the declining number of new student applicants. This suggests that, while the innovations contribute positively to improving the school’s image, external factors and competitive dynamics within the local educational environment also play a determining role. The principal (SB) stated:

“The innovations implemented have indeed improved the school’s image, but the number of new applicants has not increased significantly. This is because there are many other schools with more complete facilities and more strategic locations, so competition is getting tougher.” (Interview, July 22, 2024)

This statement illustrates that the success of innovations in enhancing brand image is influenced not only by internal factors but also by external conditions such as the presence of competing institutions with superior facilities and more advantageous locations. The effectiveness analysis encompasses several key indicators: the achievement of innovation objectives, positive changes in

stakeholders' perceptions, and the sustainability of implemented programs. While most innovation targets have been met, the sustainability aspect remains dependent on resource availability and continued institutional commitment.

The supporting factors identified include the principal's strong commitment, the active involvement of teachers and students, and the continuity of program implementation. Conversely, inhibiting factors involve limited budget allocations, inadequate facilities, a less strategic school location, and unstable internet connectivity. These constraints hinder the optimization of innovation programs, particularly those that rely heavily on technological integration and digital communication.

The findings suggest that innovation effectiveness is moderately high but still constrained by structural limitations. In this regard, strategies aimed at strengthening collaboration with stakeholders, optimizing low-cost yet high-impact innovations, and advocating for infrastructural improvements from local government authorities are deemed necessary to ensure long-term success.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the principal's leadership innovations at SMP Negeri 35 Tebo Regency encompass enhancing both academic and non-academic achievements, improving facilities and infrastructure, implementing the Green School program, promoting active-creative-enjoyable learning, integrating educational technology, digitalizing promotional efforts, and guiding graduates to compete successfully for admission to prestigious upper-level schools. These innovations have had a positive impact on strengthening the school's brand image, although the number of new applicants continues to decline. Supporting factors include the principal's commitment, teacher and student involvement, and program continuity, while inhibiting factors involve budget constraints, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, an unfavorable location, and poor internet connectivity. The effectiveness of these innovations can be considered fairly good, yet not optimal, as they still depend on resource availability and external policy support. These findings address the three research questions concerning the forms of innovation, supporting and inhibiting factors, and their effectiveness in enhancing brand image. Overall, the study affirms that innovative leadership can serve as a strategic instrument for strengthening a school's image, particularly in rural areas.

This research offers a theoretical contribution by enriching the discourse on the relationship between innovative leadership and school brand image formation in resource-limited contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on rural junior high schools facing structural challenges, resulting in contextually relevant and realistic innovation strategies. The practical implications of this research include prioritizing cost-efficient yet high-impact innovations, improving teacher capacity in technology utilization, strengthening digital promotion, and establishing partnerships with prestigious continuation schools. Local governments are encouraged to provide support through improvements to basic infrastructure and internet connectivity to maximize program effectiveness. Furthermore, future studies should expand the geographical scope and employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to more objectively measure brand

image perceptions. Accordingly, the results of this study can serve as a reference for principals, teachers, and policymakers in developing innovative leadership strategies that are relevant to local contexts.

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