

Digital Communication Practices in Public and Islamic Schools: A Comparative Content Analysis Across Elementary and Senior Secondary Levels in Malang

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Abstract

The proliferation of Instagram as a primary channel for institutional branding has intensified competition among schools to construct distinct public identities, yet limited research has systematically compared how public and Islamic schools translate this platform into measurable communication outcomes. This study examines differences in digital communication practices between public and Islamic schools in Malang, comparing content characteristics and audience engagement across four official Instagram accounts spanning elementary and senior secondary levels: SD Brawijaya Smart School and SMA HelloMotion (public), and SD Islam Sabilillah and MAN 2 Kota Malang (Islamic). Using content analysis of 428 posts published between October 2025 and March 2026, coded into five communication categories, alongside calculation of raw Engagement Rate (ER) for each account's highest-performing content, the findings reveal a pronounced institutional divergence. Islamic schools posted nearly four times more frequently than public schools and relied predominantly on achievement-showcasing content, while academic-process content remained marginal for both. Public schools, by contrast, foregrounded creative and academic-process narratives. Engagement patterns differed significantly: informational posts tied to admissions cycles generated the highest, follower-bound ER among Islamic schools, whereas a teacher-generated academic reel at SMA HelloMotion achieved an exceptional 393.10% ER driven largely by algorithmic virality rather than favorable sentiment. These results challenge simplified equations between virality and brand success.

Keywords: *Digital Communication, School Branding, Instagram, Engagement Rate, Content Analysis, Islamic Education.*

Abstrak

Maraknya penggunaan Instagram sebagai saluran utama untuk membangun citra institusi telah meningkatkan persaingan antar sekolah dalam membentuk identitas publik yang khas. Namun, penelitian yang secara sistematis membandingkan bagaimana sekolah negeri dan sekolah Islam memanfaatkan platform ini untuk menghasilkan capaian komunikasi yang terukur masih terbatas. Penelitian ini mengkaji perbedaan praktik komunikasi digital antara sekolah negeri dan sekolah Islam di Malang dengan membandingkan karakteristik konten dan keterlibatan audiens pada empat akun Instagram resmi yang mewakili jenjang sekolah dasar dan menengah atas, yaitu SD Brawijaya Smart School dan SMA HelloMotion sebagai sekolah negeri, serta SD Islam Sabilillah dan MAN 2 Kota Malang sebagai sekolah Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis isi terhadap 428 unggahan yang dipublikasikan antara Oktober 2025 dan Maret 2026, yang dikodekan ke dalam lima kategori komunikasi, serta penghitungan *Engagement*

Rate (ER) mentah untuk konten dengan performa tertinggi pada masing-masing akun. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya perbedaan institusional yang cukup mencolok. Sekolah Islam mengunggah konten hampir empat kali lebih sering dibandingkan sekolah negeri dan sebagian besar mengandalkan konten yang menampilkan prestasi, sedangkan konten yang menampilkan proses akademik tetap relatif terbatas pada kedua kelompok sekolah. Sebaliknya, sekolah negeri lebih menonjolkan narasi kreatif dan proses akademik. Pola keterlibatan audiens juga menunjukkan perbedaan yang signifikan. Unggahan informatif yang berkaitan dengan siklus penerimaan peserta didik menghasilkan ER berbasis pengikut tertinggi pada sekolah Islam, sedangkan sebuah *reel* akademik yang dibuat oleh guru di SMA HelloMotion mencapai ER luar biasa sebesar 393,10%, yang sebagian besar didorong oleh viralitas algoritmik, bukan oleh sentimen audiens yang positif. Temuan ini menantang anggapan sederhana yang menyamakan viralitas dengan keberhasilan citra atau *brand* sekolah.

Kata Kunci: *Komunikasi Digital, Branding Sekolah, Instagram, Engagement Rate, Analisis Isi, Pendidikan Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in the last two decades has fundamentally changed the way organizations, including educational institutions, build and maintain relationships with their publics. Social media, conceptually defined as a collection of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content ¹, is no longer merely a complement to an organization's communication strategy but has become a primary channel enabling faster, more personal, and more sustainable interactions between organizations and their stakeholders. The inherent functions of social media, such as identity formation, conversation, content sharing, and relationship and reputation building, make these platforms not merely one-way information distribution channels, but spaces where an organization's identity and reputation are collectively formed together with its publics.² Within the framework of stakeholder theory, every organization essentially operates within a network of relationships with various groups that influence and are influenced by the achievement of the organization's goals.³ For schools, these groups include students, parents, alumni, educators, and the surrounding community whose trust is a prerequisite for the institution's sustainability.

Schools' reliance on the trust and support of these diverse groups makes communication not merely a supplementary administrative activity, but a strategic instrument in maintaining institutional social legitimacy. A classic study by Ellison et al. demonstrated that engagement in social networking platforms can strengthen users' social capital, a finding relevant to extend to the context of relationships between educational institutions and their communities.⁴ Unlike conventional public relations communication

¹ Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010): 59–68.

² Jan H. Kietzmann et al., "Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 54, no. 3 (2011): 241–51.

³ R. Edward Freeman, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, 7th ed. (Pitman, 1984), 46.

⁴ Nicole B. Ellison et al., "The Benefits of Facebook 'Friends': Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 4 (2007): 1143–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x>.

patterns, which tend to be one-way and oriented solely toward information dissemination⁵, digital platforms offer a two-way communication space that allows schools not only to convey information but also to receive direct feedback from parents, students, alumni, and the wider community.⁶

This shift in communication style from a one-way, informative format to a more conversational and participatory pattern has even been shown to strengthen the audience's sense of ownership of the educational institution, as the audience is actively involved through questions, polls, and collaborative posts.⁷ This situation encourages schools, both at the elementary and secondary levels, to begin systematically utilizing digital platforms to convey academic activities, institutional values, student achievement, and other administrative information to the public.⁸ Through this type of communication pattern, schools no longer function merely as providers of educational services, but also become entities that actively build their image and social legitimacy in the digital space.

Among the various social media platforms available, Instagram holds a unique position in school institutional communication due to its strong visual character and diverse content formats, ranging from photo uploads and short videos to ephemeral story features.⁹ These characteristics make Instagram a relevant channel for schools to publicize academic and non-academic activities¹⁰, showcase student achievements¹¹, disseminate information on new student admissions¹², and build emotional connections with parents and the surrounding community.¹³ Findings from the context of secondary schools in Indonesia also confirm that improving the quality of schools' Instagram content consistently contributes to increased follower engagement, both through the use of reels and stories as well as the comments and direct messaging features.¹⁴ Through curated posts, schools are essentially constructing a narrative about themselves, an institutional representation deliberately crafted to meet the public's information needs while building trust.

⁵ J.E Grunig and T. Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, 6th ed. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 23.

⁶ Paul Capriotti and Ileana Zeler, "Analysing Effective Social Media Communication in Higher Education Institutions," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 1 (2023): 656.

⁷ Marina Galioto et al., "The Use of Social Networks in Institutional Communication at University: A Prospective Pattern for Enhancing the Sense of Belonging among Students," *Frontiers in Communication* 10 (2025): 1523295.

⁸ Isabel Sørensen et al., "Platforms Matter: Analyzing User Engagement with Social Media Content of Swiss Higher Education Institutions," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 36, no. 1 (2026): 149–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2023.2289009>.

⁹ Ganga Dhanesh et al., "Social Media Engagement with Organization-Generated Content: Role of Visuals in Enhancing Public Engagement with Organizations on Facebook and Instagram," *Public Relations Review* 48, no. 2 (2022): 102174.

¹⁰ Maria Kartika Magdalena and Sri Lestari, "Analisis Pemanfaatan Instagram Sebagai Media Branding Pada SDN Kutisari 1 Surabaya," *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai* 10, no. 2 (2026): 11811–15.

¹¹ Mufasssir Kanzul Akhbar et al., "Manajemen Media Sosial Sebagai Usaha Peningkatan Citra Sekolah," *Proceedings Series of Educational Studies*, 2025, <https://conference.um.ac.id/index.php/pses/article/view/10365>.

¹² Muhammad Arif, "Strategi Manajemen Humas Dalam Meningkatkan Jumlah Peserta Didik Baru Di Smp It Al-Utsaimin," *Pendas: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar* 11, no. 03 (2026): 356–64.

¹³ Alfina Luky Damayanti and M. Athoiful Fanan, "Penguatan Branding Sekolah Melalui Media Sosial Instagram: Analisis Strategi Humas SDIK Mutiara Anak Sholeh," *Pendas: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar* 10, no. 4 (2025): 1211–24.

¹⁴ Andri Cahyo Purnomo, "Manajemen Pemasaran Pendidikan Berbasis Strategi Penentuan Pasar Sasaran," *Jurnal Sosial Humaniora Dan Pendidikan* 1, no. 2 (2022): 130–37.

Although technically all schools have access to the same platform, their digital communication practices are never neutral or uniform. These practices are constantly shaped by the institution's values, its educational goals, the characteristics of the stakeholders it serves, and the surrounding institutional context. In institutional communication studies, these differences are generally reflected in three main dimensions: content upload patterns, the level of interactivity with the audience, and the orientation of the message delivered.¹⁵ Schools with a religious orientation, for example, tend to face more complex demands in managing their digital content: maintaining politeness and Islamic values on the one hand, while simultaneously remaining competitive in responding to algorithmic logic and the expectations of digital audiences in general.¹⁶

These differences in institutional contexts, in turn, give rise to differences in message priorities and self-representation patterns between public and Islamic schools. Islamic schools generally prioritize religious values, moral development, and strengthening Islamic identity as integral parts of their communication narratives, in line with the institutional communication and relationship patterns typical of *Pesantren* and *madrasahs*.¹⁷ Meanwhile, public schools tend to emphasize academic achievement, non-academic achievements, and the image of institutional modernity as the primary attractions in their public communications.¹⁸ These differences in orientation emphasize that schools' digital communication practices cannot be understood generically but rather need to be examined within the framework of the institutional characteristics of each type of school.

Studies on social media use by educational institutions have developed rapidly, particularly in explaining how institutions utilize social media, the types of content they produce, and its effectiveness in supporting institutional goals.¹⁹ Some studies have even explored the practical aspects of individual secondary schools, such as the case of improving the quality of Instagram content in one secondary school.²⁰ However, most of these studies remain at the level of strategy descriptions or single case studies, and have not systematically and comparatively linked the characteristics of the content produced to audience response patterns.²¹ Research specifically comparing content characteristics and audience responses between schools with different institutional contexts, particularly

¹⁵ Capriotti and Zeler, "Analysing Effective Social Media Communication in Higher Education Institutions."

¹⁶ Rifka Jannatul Firdausiyah et al., "Exploring the Paradox of Islamic Boarding School Digital Marketing between the Values of Politeness and the Demands of Social Media Algorithms," *AFKARINA: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 10, no. 2 (2025): 96–106.

¹⁷ Z. Zamroni et al., "Leader Member Exchange in Building Effective Communication in Islamic Boarding Schools," *El-Buhuth: Borneo Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 77–89.

¹⁸ Ahmad Fauzi et al., "The Influence of Social Media on Public Relations as a Reinforcement of Higher Education Reputation," *Managere: Indonesian Journal of Educational Management* 7, no. 1 (2025): 91–101.

¹⁹ Sörensen et al., "Platforms Matter"; Fauzi et al., "The Influence of Social Media on Public Relations as a Reinforcement of Higher Education Reputation."

²⁰ Ekawati Purnomo et al., "Peningkatan Kualitas Instagram Sekolah Untuk Menambah Engagement Di Akun Instagram SMA Cita Hati School Surabaya," *Ideguru: Jurnal Karya Ilmiah Guru* 10, no. 1 (2025): 64–76.

²¹ Dhanesh et al., "Social Media Engagement with Organization-Generated Content."

at the elementary and secondary levels, is still relatively limited. This gap is significant given that public schools and Islamic schools have different values, goals, and stakeholder bases,²² potentially resulting in different patterns of content production and audience response.

Departing from this gap, this research is structured in a line of thought that connects digital communication practices with content characteristics including the type, theme, and orientation of messages, as well as audience responses represented through behavioral indicators such as the number of likes, comments, and overall engagement.²³ The content characteristics in this study were examined through a systematic and replicable content analysis approach, as developed in the tradition of communication content analysis methodology.²⁴ This study was not intended to measure the perception or image of schools in the public eye, but rather to analyze the behavioral responses of directly observed audiences to the characteristics of messages published by public schools and Islamic schools on Instagram. This study aims to examine the differences in digital communication practices between public schools and Islamic schools through an analysis of Instagram content characteristics and audience responses. With a focus on: the characteristics of the dominant content of each school on Instagram and the differences in content characteristics between the two; Characteristics that trigger higher audience responses; and differences in audience response patterns between the two.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a comparative design. content analysis to examine how public schools and Islamic schools at the elementary and secondary levels construct digital communication practices through their respective official Instagram accounts. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the nature of the research questions that are oriented towards interpreting message characteristics, communication themes, and information presentation patterns, rather than on testing statistical relationships between variables.²⁵ Qualitative content analysis was chosen as the analysis technique because this method systematically allows researchers to identify important aspects of communication materials, build analytical categories, and interpret patterns of meaning in textual and visual data.²⁶

The object of the study was the official Instagram accounts of four schools in

²² Freeman, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, vi.

²³ Capriotti and Zeler, "Analysing Effective Social Media Communication in Higher Education Institutions"; Dhanesh et al., "Social Media Engagement with Organization-Generated Content."

²⁴ K. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (SAGE, 2018), 24.

²⁵ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions* (Sage publications Thousand Oaks, CA, 1998), 2:46, <https://repositorio.uasb.edu.ec/server/api/core/bitstreams/67bf3841-9d1f-4eee-bd62-349225d29c69/content>; Elizabeth J. Tisdell et al., *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (John Wiley & Sons, 2025), 5, [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=tRpCEQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Merriam,+S.+B.,+%26+Tisdell,+E.+J.+\(2016\).+Qualitative+Research:+A+Guide+to+Design+and+Implementation+\(4th+ed.\).+Jossey-Bass&ots=0CB5Q5MWLp&sig=PtqPKaLoO0_yHWoXW6UgefTC0U](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=tRpCEQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Merriam,+S.+B.,+%26+Tisdell,+E.+J.+(2016).+Qualitative+Research:+A+Guide+to+Design+and+Implementation+(4th+ed.).+Jossey-Bass&ots=0CB5Q5MWLp&sig=PtqPKaLoO0_yHWoXW6UgefTC0U).

²⁶ Margrit Schreier, "Qualitative Content Analysis," *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* 1 (2014): 170–83; Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 24; Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, 2nd ed. (SAGE, 2017), 1.

Malang City, consisting of two general schools: SD Brawijaya Smart School (account @sdbss_ub) and SMA HelloMotion Malang (account @hellomotion.malang), and two Islamic schools: SD Islam Sabilillah Malang (account @sekolah_sabilillah) and MAN 2 Kota Malang (account @man2kotamalang). All four accounts are official institutional channels that can be publicly verified through links on the school profiles and official websites of each institution. The criteria for account activity were not based on assumptions, but rather on direct tracing of the volume of posts and follower base of each account at the time of sample determination: SD BSS (574 posts, 3,681 followers), SMA HelloMotion (153 posts, 8,690 followers), SD Islam Sabilillah (806 posts, 195,000 followers), and MAN 2 Kota Malang (2,374 posts, around 34,000 followers). This figure serves as an empirical basis for stating that the four accounts consistently meet the active criteria, so the sampling criteria in this section are no longer based on assumptions but rather on traceable evidence. This study positions the four schools as instrumental cases selected purposively to generate analytical generalizations about digital communication patterns, rather than population generalizations.²⁷

Data were collected over a six-month observation period from October 2025 to March 2026, with the unit of analysis being individual Instagram posts. Each post was documented along with its visual elements, caption, upload date, content category, and observable audience response indicators, namely the number of likes and comments, in addition to the number of followers of the account at the time of data collection. Because the number of followers, likes, and comments is dynamic and constantly changing, all interaction metrics were taken at the same point in time for each account, namely at the end of the observation period, to maintain consistency and repeatability of calculations between schools. Content category scheme was structured through two stages: 1) deriving initial categories from the literature on educational institutional communication and previous studies of school digital communication (deductive), and 2) refining the categories through initial exploration of a small portion of the data to capture themes unique to the local context (inductive), such as religious communication on school accounts. The final categories used are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Post Content Categories

Category	Operational Definition	Source of Category Reduction
Academic and non-academic communication	Learning activities, class activities, exams, and curricular agendas, extracurricular activities, student activities	Deductive
Achievement Communication	Awards, competitions and student achievements	Deductive
Institutional Communication	School profile, programs, facilities, and policies	Deductive
Informational Communication	PPDB, registration, announcements, and school agenda	Deductive
Religious communication and character strengthening	Worship activities and religious events (big days and religious commemorations) and strengthening character values and religiosity	Inductive

²⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications* (Sage Thousand Oaks, CA, 2018), 6:37–38, https://www.academia.edu/download/106905310/%7BArtikel_Yustinus_Calvin_Gai_Mali%7D.pdf.

In line with the descriptive qualitative nature of this research, audience response rate data (engagement rate) such as likes, comments, and shares are supporting data to enrich the interpretation of the characteristics of digital messages. The practice of calculating frequency or proportion in qualitative content analysis is a common quantification step and does not change the interpretative epistemological basis of the research, as long as the numbers are used to help interpret, not for statistical generalization.²⁸ The audience response rate is calculated using the follower -based engagement rate formula , namely:

$$ER = [(Likes + Comments + Share) / Followers] \times 100\% \quad (1)$$

This formula is a general form of the follower- based engagement rate formula commonly used in social media analytics research and has been applied to academic research on institutional Instagram accounts, including comparative studies of Instagram-based digital communication media.

Data analysis followed the interactive flow of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña²⁹ which consists of three stages: data condensation, namely: Selecting and organizing posts based on a category scheme; data presentation, namely: constructing a matrix that maps schools, dominant communication themes, and audience response patterns; and drawing conclusions, namely: interpreting communication patterns that emerge from the matrix. Comparisons between schools were conducted through within-case analysis and cross-case analysis . In the within-case stage , each school's communication patterns were analyzed in depth as a whole case. In the cross-case stage , these patterns were compared between schools within the same group (fellow public schools, fellow Islamic schools) and across groups (public schools with Islamic schools), with a focus on dominant themes, how schools represent themselves, and audience response patterns. The validity of the findings was maintained through four trustworthiness criteria formulated by Lincoln and Guba³⁰ and further elaborated by Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules³¹: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was achieved through triangulation at the coding stage; dependability was maintained through an audit trail in the form of written documentation; Confirmability is achieved by explicitly separating the quotations or presentation of raw data (uploads, captions) from the researcher's interpretation; and transferability is supported through rich contextual descriptions of the characteristics of each school and the observation period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the content characteristics and audience responses to

²⁸ Schreier, "Qualitative Content Analysis," 35.

²⁹ Matthew B. Miles et al., *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. (Sage Publication, 2014), 10–12.

³⁰ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *The Constructivist Credo* (Left Coast Press, 2013), 328.

³¹ Lorelli S. Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.

Instagram as a digital communication practice in educational institutions, through a comparative study between public schools and Islamic schools in Malang City. The development of digital technology has encouraged elementary and secondary educational institutions to adopt more modern communication strategies, including the use of social media as a means of public relations and school branding.³² Instagram, with its capabilities in visual storytelling and its ability to reach a younger audience demographic, offers significant opportunities for educational institutions to expand their reach and build their image.³³

Characteristics of Dominant Content and Differences in Characteristics of Instagram Content between Public Schools and Islamic Schools

Content characteristics data were obtained through observation and documentation of posts on four official school Instagram accounts in Malang City during the period of October 2025 to March 2026, namely SD Brawijaya Smart School (SD BSS) and SMA HelloMotion representing public schools, as well as SD Islam Sabilillah and MAN 2 Malang City representing Islamic schools. Each post was grouped into one of five communication categories: achievement communication (posts highlighting students' academic and non-academic achievements, such as Olympiad results), religious and character-strengthening communication (greetings for religious and national holidays and messages reinforcing values), informational communication (public service information such as new student admissions and job vacancies), institutional information/communication (documentation of internal activities and institutional ceremonies), and academic and non-academic communication (documentation of the teaching and learning process and extracurricular activities inside and outside the classroom). A summary of the number of posts in each category is presented in Table 2.

There is a wide gap in post volume between the two groups of schools. BSS Elementary School and HelloMotion High School (public schools) combined for only 91 posts over six months, while Sabilillah Islamic Elementary School and MAN 2 Malang City (Islamic schools) recorded 387 posts over the same period, a ratio of nearly one to four. This significant difference cannot be explained simply by differences in how diligently they manage their accounts. Rather, it can be interpreted as a reflection of differing competitive pressures between the institutions. Both MAN 2 Malang City and Sabilillah Islamic Elementary School operate in a student admissions market populated by many similar faith-based schools, so a high post frequency likely serves as a sustainable marketing tool to maintain visibility throughout the PPDB (school enrollment) cycle. This aligns with Mahfudhoh & Sulistyorini's findings from other

³² Damayanti and Fanan, "Penguatan Branding Sekolah Melalui Media Sosial Instagram"; Brady Lund, "Universities Engaging Social Media Users: An Investigation of Quantitative Relationships between Universities' Facebook Followers/Interactions and University Attributes," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 29, no. 2 (2019): 251–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2019.1641875>.

³³ Lund, "Universities Engaging Social Media Users"; Adam Peruta and Alison B. Shields, "Social Media in Higher Education: Understanding How Colleges and Universities Use Facebook," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 27, no. 1 (2017): 131–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2016.1212451>; Agus Sriyanto and Zaenal Muttaqin, "From Instagram to Campus: The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Students' Interest through Trust and Brand Recognition," *Kalijaga Journal of Communication* 6, no. 2 (2024): 139–70.

Islamic schools in Malang³⁴, which showed that structured and consistent Instagram management plays a role in strengthening Islamic identity and parental trust in the school.

Table 2. Distribution of Instagram Content Categories of Four Schools in Malang (October 2025–March 2026)

Account Name	Performance	religious and character building	Informational	Institutional	academic and non-academic	Number of Uploads
BSS Elementary School (Public School)	3	21	9	4	3	40
HelloMotion High School (Public School)	4	11	14	5	17	51
Sabilillah Islamic Elementary School (Islamic school)	78	15	25	16	7	141
MAN 2 Malang City (Islamic school)	91	37	60	53	5	246

The academic and non-academic communication categories were the ones with the fewest posts in both Islamic schools: 7 out of 141 posts (5%) in Sabilillah Islamic Elementary School and 5 out of 246 posts (2%) in MAN 2 Malang City. The most dominant category in both was achievement communication, with 78 posts (55%) and 91 posts (37%), respectively. In other words, the content strategies of both Islamic schools were consistently built on showcasing student achievements, rather than documenting the learning process itself. This pattern differs from HelloMotion High School, which instead prioritized academic and non-academic communication (17 out of 51 posts, 33%), with classroom atmosphere, student projects, and creative processes as the main content. Meanwhile, BSS Elementary School dominated by religious communication and character building (21 out of 40 posts, approximately 52%).

Based on Customer-Based Brand Equity framework by Keller³⁵, which positions brand associations—what audiences learn, see, and feel about an entity over time—as the primary source of a brand's strength. When this framework is used to understand the data above, SD Islam Sabilillah and MAN 2 Malang City appear to build their brand associations through the accumulation of repeated evidence of achievement, while SMA HelloMotion builds them through the image of a creative learning space and a transparent learning process. Zakaria et al.³⁶ refer to the first pattern (Islamic schools) as part of a compilation of public assumptions formed from the accumulation of evidence of the school's achievements, while Parati and Diana³⁷ assert that this pattern effectively boosts

³⁴ Aini Mahfudhoh and Sulistyorini Sulistyorini, "Instagram Social Media Management Strategy As A Creative Media To Increase School Reach And Image," *Ar-Rosikhun: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (2026): 251–63, <https://doi.org/10.18860/rosikhun.v5i2.40156>.

³⁵ Kevin Lane Keller, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity," *Journal of Marketing* 57, no. 1 (1993): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299305700101>.

³⁶ Wahyu Zakaria et al., "Strategi Membangun Brand Image Dalam Meningkatkan Daya Saing Lembaga Pendidikan," *Indonesian Journal of Digital Public Relations (IJDPR)* 1, no. 2 (2023): 64–75.

³⁷ Parati and Eka Diana, "Peran Media Sosial Dalam Strategi Public Relations Untuk Membangun Brand Image Di Lembaga Pendidikan," *Pendas : Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar* 10, no. 03 (2025): 223–35, <https://doi.org/10.23969/jp.v10i02.29010>.

the visibility of the schools in Malang they observed. However, the dominance of one category does not mean that schools neglect other functions: the 25 informational posts at SD Islam Sabilillah and 60 similar posts at MAN 2 Malang City indicate that both still carry out basic public relations functions, only the portion is smaller than the achievement content. The high proportion of institutional content at MAN 2 Malang City (53 uploads, around 22%), can be explained because as a state madrasah under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion, it has access to the ceremonial and administrative documentation needs of the Ministry of Religion's agenda compared to the other three schools.

Characteristics of Content That Trigger Higher Audience Response

To measure the extent to which the volume of uploads correlates with the actual response from the audience, this study calculated the rough Engagement Rate (ER) for each upload using the formula:

$$ER = (\text{Likes} + \text{Comments} + \text{Shares}) \div \text{Number of Followers} \times 100\% \quad (2)$$

This formula is a commonly used metric in Instagram-based digital marketing studies due to its simplicity, which describes the ratio of real interactions to an account's follower base.³⁸ The higher the ER of a post, the greater the proportion of followers, or even users outside of followers if the ER exceeds 100%, who actually interact with the content, rather than simply viewing it in passing. Details of posts with the highest ER from each account are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Posts with the Highest Engagement Rate for Each Account

Indicator	BSS Elementary School	HelloMotion High School	Sabilillah Islamic Elementary School	MAN 2 Malang City
Like	227	32,400	1,072	3,773
Comment	1	356	14	80
Share	10	2,186	562	525
Total Interactions	238	34,942	1,648	4,378
Number of Followers	3,709	8,889	17,500	33,100
Engagement Rate	6.42%	393.10%	9.42%	13.23%
Upload Format & Content	Reel Carnival Ramadhan 1447 H (13 Feb 2026)	Illustration subject discussion reel (11 Oct 2025)	Teacher vacancy poster (12 Mar 2026)	PMB Poster 2026/2027 (31 Jan 2026)
Content Categories	Religion & Character Building	Academic & Non-Academic	Informational	Informational
Dominant Sentiment of Comments	Neutral	Negative (location complaints)	Positive & Questions	Positive & Questions

A particularly noteworthy finding in this section comes from HelloMotion High School. The post with the highest ER on this account was not an animated learning video

³⁸ José Carlos Losada Díaz and Javier Almela-Baeza, "Emotional Digital Storytelling as a Driver of Social Media Engagement in Higher Education: A Multi-Platform Analysis," *Information* 17, no. 1 (2026): 30, <https://doi.org/10.3390/info17010030>.

reel on January 2, 2026, which recorded an ER of 157.64%, but rather a reel uploaded by a teacher account (maswaditya) on October 11, 2025, containing a discussion of the subject of illustration. This post received 32,400 likes, 356 comments, and 2,186 shares from a base of 8,889 followers, bringing its ER to 393.10%, which is more than three times the account's own follower count. This figure confirms that the content's reach has far exceeded the account's organic audience, likely due to Instagram's algorithm pushing it into users' Explore or Reels pages more widely.

A critical suggests reveals that such a high ER does not automatically translate to a positive public reception. The dominant sentiment in the comments section of this post is actually negative, with potential audiences complaining of envy because they were interested in participating in similar learning but were hampered by the school's location outside their city. This finding corrects the tendency to automatically equate high ER with branding success. Algorithm-driven virality can reach audiences demographically and geographically far outside a school's target market, and the reactions that emerge from this unfiltered reach may reflect more on the appeal of the content format, in this case the personal and creative delivery style of the teacher who created the content, rather than any real loyalty or trust in the institution. Therefore, ER needs to be read alongside sentiment analysis, not as a stand-alone indicator of success. A similar pattern recurs in other HelloMotion high school posts: the Student Design Project post about student-designed uniforms (October 30, 2025) recorded an ER of 54.66% but was dominated by negative comments protesting the design, while the post about the OSIS work program (October 12, 2025) achieved an ER of 24.09% with positive sentiment. This suggests that content about students' creative processes and products consistently triggers the highest ER on this account, but the direction of sentiment swings freely depending on who the algorithm reaches, not solely on the quality of the content.

In contrast, the other three accounts recorded the highest ERs, which remained below 100%: SD BSS at 6.42%, SD Islam Sabilillah at 9.42%, and MAN 2 Kota Malang at 13.23%. The significant gap with SMA HelloMotion's performance indicates that these three schools' best posts circulated primarily among their existing followers, such as: parents, students, and alumni, rather than reaching a broader Instagram audience. SD BSS's highest-ranking post was a reel of the 1447 H Ramadan Parade (February 13, 2026), which featured students directly participating in welcoming the fasting month; the comments were neutral, with many expressing parents' pride in seeing their children appear in the video, rather than explicitly discussing the school's reputation. Meanwhile, the highest uploads of MAN 2 Malang City and SD Islam Sabilillah were both informational posters, namely: new student admissions (PPDB) and teaching staff vacancies, which were felt to have clear utility value and deadlines for their audiences, thus naturally encouraging sharing behavior with those who need the information. This pattern is consistent with the description of Parati and Diana³⁹ who stated that consistently uploading quality content increases the opportunity for schools to strengthen their brand image, but the findings above add an important nuance: in informational content, what encourages engagement is not just visual quality, but the urgency and practical usefulness

³⁹ Parati and Diana, "Peran Media Sosial Dalam Strategi Public Relations Untuk Membangun Brand Image Di Lembaga Pendidikan."

of the information for the community.

As Marulloh and Susilo⁴⁰ emphasize, the success of digital branding is not solely measured by the quantity of posts or the ER score, but rather by the extent to which the content fosters emotional engagement, trust, and identity recognition among its audience. Read from this perspective, the case of HelloMotion High School serves as an important example: the highest ER does not necessarily translate to the most beneficial form of engagement for the school's image, as most interactions originate from comments that complain, not those that express appreciation. Conversely, the comment trail on MAN 2 Kota Malang's posts contains enthusiastic prospective applicants asking about the school's admission process and facilities, while comments on Sabilillah Islamic Elementary School's posts demonstrate the school community's pride in its students' academic achievements. Examples of screenshots of the comment sections from the four accounts are presented in the following image.

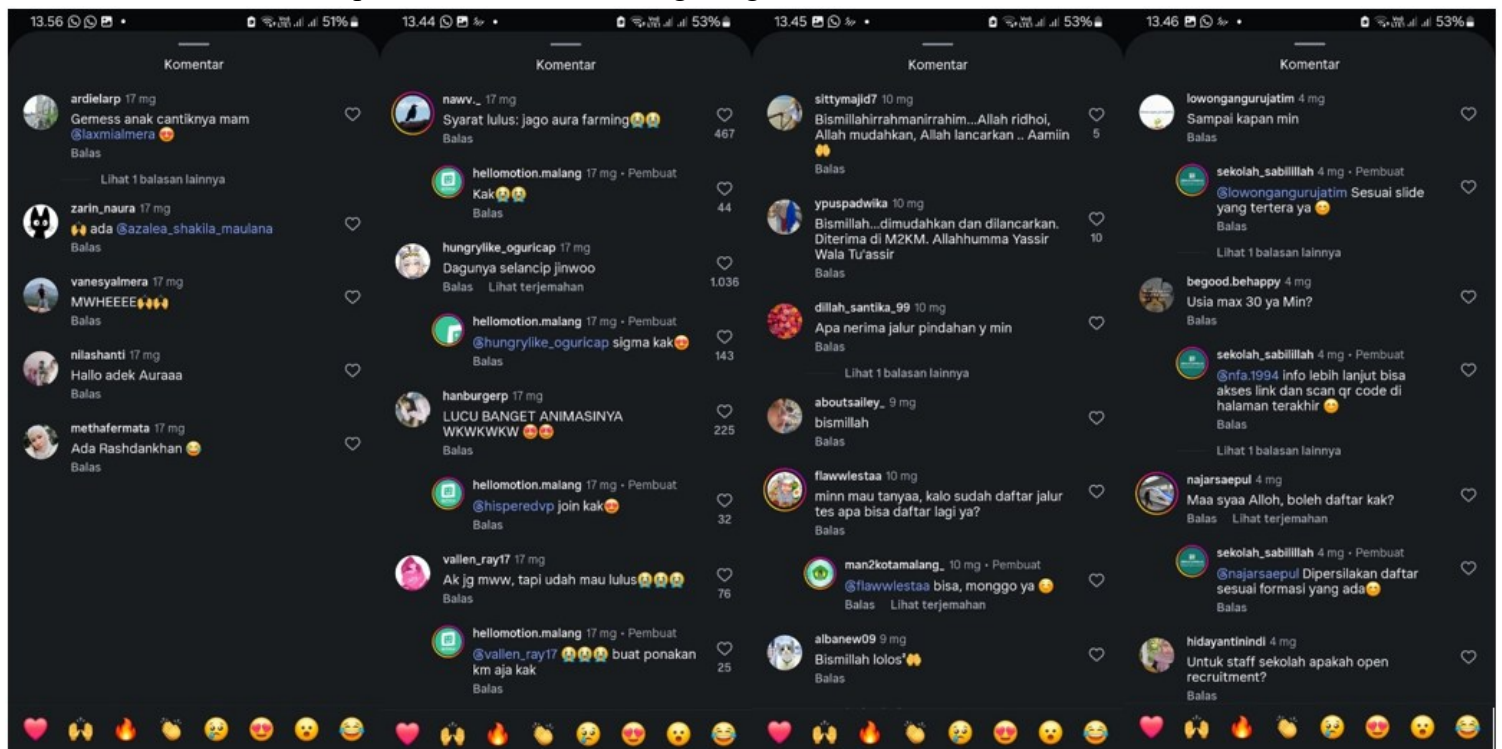


Figure 1. Example of a Screenshot of Comment Sentiment on the Fourth School Account's Post

This type of comment pattern is close to what is known as brand attachment, namely: the audience's emotional attachment to an institution that is evident in their willingness to show pride or provide open support in the digital public space.⁴¹ However, findings at HelloMotion High School show that this kind of attachment does not always occur even though its ER is the highest among the four schools; in fact, in posts with moderate ER (24.09% and 157.64%), positive sentiment appears more consistently than

⁴⁰ Rama Putra Gema Marulloh and Mohamad Joko Susilo, "Branding Oms (Optimalisasi Media Sosial) Sebagai Strategi Penguatan Nilai Karakter, Prestasi, Dan Identitas Sekolah Di Man 2 Klaten," *Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan* 11, no. 1 (2026): 542–55, <https://doi.org/10.34125/jmp.v11i1.1589>.

⁴¹ Charles Dennis et al., "The Role of Brand Attachment Strength in Higher Education," *Journal of Business Research* 69, no. 8 (2016): 3049–57, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.020>.

in posts with the highest ER (393.10%), which are filled with complaints.

From the overall patterns above, this study found two distinct and equally effective audience engagement models, albeit through different pathways. Islamic schools, represented by Sabilillah Islamic Elementary School and MAN 2 Malang City, relied on what could be called the “showcase of achievements and urgent information” model: a high volume of posts, dominated by evidence of student achievement and time-limited information, generating stable engagement from an audience already relatively close to the institution. Public schools, specifically HelloMotion High School, relied on the “creativity of the learning process” model: a much lower volume of posts, but with the potential to penetrate the algorithm and reach a wide audience, at the risk of attracting an audience that is not always sympathetic. The choice of which strategy is more “successful” ultimately depends on the desired goal: if success is measured by reach and the likelihood of going viral, HelloMotion High School's approach is superior; if measured by the stability of trust in the community that is the school's real target market, the two Islamic schools' approach appears more controlled and predictable. The most adaptable schools going forward will likely be those that are able to combine the two: making evidence of achievement and useful information the foundation of trust, while remaining bold in experimenting with more personal and narrative visual formats to extend their reach beyond their existing audience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined two interrelated dimensions of digital communication practices among public and Islamic schools in Malang: the characteristics and dominant categories of Instagram content across institutions, and the extent to which such content generates measurable audience engagement. The findings show that Islamic schools, represented by SD Islam Sabilillah and MAN 2 Kota Malang, produced substantially higher posting volumes than their public-school counterparts and concentrated their communication strategies predominantly on achievement-oriented content. In contrast, public schools displayed a more balanced content distribution, with SMA HelloMotion placing greater emphasis on creative and academic-process narratives. These differences suggest that school branding practices on Instagram are shaped by institutional characteristics, communication priorities, and competitive pressures rather than by a single uniform model of best practice.

With regard to audience engagement, the findings indicate that high content volume does not necessarily result in higher engagement, and high engagement itself should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of successful branding. Islamic schools tended to generate more stable and follower-bound engagement, particularly through time-sensitive informational content related to admissions and institutional needs. By contrast, SMA HelloMotion recorded an exceptionally high engagement rate of 393.10% on an academic reel, largely due to algorithmic amplification beyond its existing follower base. However, the predominantly negative sentiment associated with the post demonstrates that virality and positive institutional image are not necessarily equivalent. Effective digital branding therefore requires schools to combine credible achievement-based and informational content with creative, narrative-driven formats

while simultaneously considering the sentiment and quality of audience responses.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The analysis was limited to four school Instagram accounts in Malang and covered only a six-month observation period, so the results cannot be generalized to all public and Islamic schools in Indonesia or fully represent longer-term communication patterns. In addition, audience engagement was examined primarily through observable Instagram metrics, such as likes, comments, shares, and follower-based engagement rates, while deeper aspects such as audience perceptions, motivations, trust, and interpretations of school branding were not directly investigated, and the influence of Instagram's algorithm could not be fully controlled. Future research should therefore involve a broader range of schools across different regions and educational levels, extend the observation period, and consider other social media platforms. It would also be valuable to combine content analysis with surveys, interviews, sentiment analysis, or social network analysis to better distinguish between algorithmic visibility, audience engagement, institutional trust, and long-term brand equity.

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