

The Construction of Public Perception of Outstanding Schools: A Qualitative Study of the Difference between Academic Performance and Institutional Attractiveness

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to examine how socially constructed community perceptions shape institutional attractiveness and explain the mismatch between objective school quality and parental school choice.

Research Method: A qualitative single-case study was conducted at SDN Sonoadi, an Indonesian public elementary school that consistently demonstrated high academic and non-academic achievement but experienced declining student enrollment during 2021–2026. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis involving school leaders, teachers, school committee members, parents, alumni, and community leaders. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, guided by the processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization.

Results and Discussion: The findings reveal that institutional attractiveness is socially constructed through shared experiences, daily interactions, cultural values, school location, religious orientation, environmental conditions, and collectively formed social images. These factors frequently outweigh objective indicators of school quality, explaining the discrepancy between educational achievement and public preference. The findings demonstrate how the processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization collectively shape parents' school selection decisions.

Implications: The findings suggest that strengthening institutional attractiveness requires not only improving academic performance but also enhancing strategic communication, community engagement, and reputation management.

Originality: This study extends Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction Theory by demonstrating how institutional attractiveness is socially constructed through collective meaning-making, offering a novel theoretical explanation for the paradox between school achievement and declining student enrollment.

Keywords: *social construction, community perception, school achievement, institutional attractiveness, school branding.*

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a strategic instrument for developing human capital and fostering sustainable national development (Ardoin & Heimlich, 2021; Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022; Piao, 2024; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Zhang, 2025). Consequently, educational institutions are increasingly expected not only to deliver high-quality learning outcomes but also to cultivate students who demonstrate academic excellence, strong character, social competence, and lifelong learning capabilities (Arifin & Hanif, 2026; Masrom et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2024). These institutional qualities are

commonly reflected through objective indicators, including academic and non-academic achievements, accreditation status, curriculum innovation, graduate performance, and recognition received at regional or national levels (Géring et al., 2023; Khurniawan et al., 2021; Nadav et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). Within the educational management literature, such indicators are generally assumed to strengthen school reputation, enhance public trust, and ultimately increase parental preference when selecting schools for their children (Chotimah et al., 2024; Houston & Henig, 2023; Hussin et al., 2022; Qazi et al., 2022; Shayo et al., 2021; Zul et al., 2025). Accordingly, institutional attractiveness has traditionally been viewed as a direct consequence of educational quality and organizational performance (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022; Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025; Hawu & Ismanto, 2024; Indriati et al., 2025; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2024; Niedlich et al., 2021; Paderes & Yacapin, 2026; Parma et al., 2024; Pawar, 2024; Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022; Syahrika Luthfi et al., 2025).

However, this assumption is increasingly challenged by empirical realities showing that superior institutional performance does not necessarily translate into greater public demand (Houston & Henig, 2023; Parma et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025). In many educational settings, schools with outstanding academic records continue to experience declining student enrolment, whereas other institutions with comparatively modest achievements remain highly attractive to parents (Greaves et al., 2023; Hailey, 2025; Singer & Lenhoff, 2022). This inconsistency suggests that parental school choice is influenced by factors extending beyond measurable educational quality (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Hussin et al., 2022; Khurin Najwa, 2024; Parma et al., 2024). Rather than relying exclusively on objective performance indicators, communities frequently evaluate schools through socially shared experiences, interpersonal communication, cultural expectations, neighbourhood interactions, historical narratives, and collectively constructed institutional images (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Wiesner, 2022). Consequently, institutional attractiveness should not be understood solely as an objective outcome of school performance but also as a social phenomenon emerging from continuous processes of meaning construction within society (Cermeño-Aínsa, 2022; Maryati et al., 2026; Ocasio, 2023; Paderes & Yacapin, 2026).

This paradox is clearly illustrated by SDN Sonoadi, the focal case of this study. Between 2021 and 2026, the school consistently demonstrated excellent academic and non-academic performance by winning numerous regional competitions, implementing the National Driving School Programme, receiving the Adiwiyata School award, and achieving various distinctions in religious education, arts, sports, and educational innovation. From an institutional perspective, these achievements indicate effective leadership, strong organizational culture, and successful educational management (Hardiyana et al., 2025; Kadarisman & Rahman, 2024; Khurniawan et al., 2021; Nadav et al., 2025). Conceptually, such accomplishments should enhance institutional legitimacy and attract increasing numbers of prospective students (Géring et al., 2023; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Niedlich et al., 2021; Qazi et al., 2022). Surprisingly, however, student enrolment declined steadily from 67 students in 2021 to only 48 students in 2026. This contradiction presents an important research puzzle: why does a school with objectively high educational quality fail to generate equivalent levels of public attractiveness and parental preference? The existence of this paradox suggests that educational excellence alone is insufficient to explain how communities evaluate schools and make educational decisions (Greaves et al., 2023; Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Houston & Henig, 2023; Parma et al., 2024; Schreurs & Chang Rundgren, 2021).

Previous studies have extensively examined the determinants of school choice and institutional attractiveness. Most research has explained parental decisions from a rational perspective by emphasizing educational quality, service quality, school facilities, tuition fees, geographical accessibility, promotional activities, and parental satisfaction as the primary determinants of school selection (Greaves et al., 2023; Houston & Henig, 2023; Hussin et al., 2022; Parma et al., 2024). Other studies have focused on educational marketing strategies, institutional branding, and school reputation, arguing that

positive organizational images strengthen community loyalty and increase enrolment (Hawu & Ismanto, 2024; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Mundzir & Wiadi, 2025; Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2024; Pawar, 2024; Qazi et al., 2022; Zul et al., 2025). Although these studies have substantially advanced the understanding of parental decision-making, they generally conceptualize institutional attractiveness as an outcome of objective organizational characteristics and managerial strategies.

Despite these important contributions, existing literature provides only limited explanation for situations in which objective educational quality diverges from public preference (Greaves et al., 2023; Houston & Henig, 2023; Parma et al., 2024). More specifically, previous studies rarely explain how collective perceptions of school quality are socially produced, negotiated, institutionalized, and reproduced through everyday interactions within communities (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Existing school reputation and educational marketing studies largely assume that public perception reflects organizational performance, while overlooking the possibility that social meanings may evolve independently of objective institutional conditions (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022; Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025; Hawu & Ismanto, 2024; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Qazi et al., 2022). Consequently, these perspectives cannot adequately explain why schools with comparable—or even superior—educational performance often receive substantially different levels of public acceptance (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Hussin et al., 2022; Schreurs & Chang Rundgren, 2021; Singer & Lenhoff, 2022).

This limitation indicates a significant theoretical gap in the current literature. Rather than asking whether school quality influences institutional attractiveness, there remains insufficient understanding of how communities collectively construct meanings about school quality and why these socially constructed meanings sometimes outweigh empirical evidence of institutional performance (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023). This gap becomes particularly important because parental educational decisions are frequently embedded within broader social contexts characterized by interpersonal communication, shared experiences, local cultural values, community narratives, and symbolic interpretations that extend beyond measurable indicators of educational achievement (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Houston & Henig, 2023; Khurin Najwa, 2024; Parma et al., 2024; Shayo et al., 2021; Singer & Lenhoff, 2022).

To address this limitation, the present study adopts Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction Theory as its primary analytical framework. Unlike previous perspectives that treat reputation and attractiveness as direct consequences of institutional performance, Social Construction Theory conceptualizes reality as continuously created and maintained through the interrelated processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Maryati et al., 2026; Ocasio, 2023). This perspective offers stronger explanatory power for understanding why institutional attractiveness may emerge not simply from academic excellence but from collectively negotiated meanings that become accepted as social reality (Cermeno-Aínsa, 2022; Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Accordingly, schools with similar levels of educational quality may experience markedly different public responses because community perceptions are socially constructed rather than objectively determined (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Ocasio, 2023; Shayo et al., 2021; Singer & Lenhoff, 2022).

This study makes three important contributions to the existing literature. First, it addresses an underexplored research gap by explaining why objectively high-performing schools may experience declining public demand despite consistently demonstrating academic excellence (Greaves et al., 2023; Houston & Henig, 2023; Parma et al., 2024). Previous studies have predominantly examined school attractiveness through measurable organizational characteristics, such as educational quality, facilities, service quality, institutional reputation, and marketing strategies (Hawu & Ismanto, 2024; Hussin et al., 2022; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Pawar, 2024; Qazi et al., 2022). In contrast, this study demonstrates that institutional attractiveness is not merely an outcome of objective school performance but is also shaped

by socially constructed meanings developed through community interactions, shared experiences, and cultural contexts (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Shayo et al., 2021).

Second, this study extends Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction Theory to the field of educational management by illustrating how the interrelated processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization collectively construct public perceptions of school quality (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Maryati et al., 2026; Ocasio, 2023). Rather than treating these concepts as descriptive categories, the study employs them as analytical mechanisms to explain how collective meanings become institutionalized and subsequently influence parental school choice (Cermeño-Aínsa, 2022; Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Ocasio, 2023; Parma et al., 2024). Third, the study contributes to educational governance by providing practical insights into how schools, educational authorities, and policymakers can strengthen institutional legitimacy through strategic communication, community engagement, and reputation management, thereby complementing efforts to improve objective educational quality (Chotimah et al., 2024; Géring et al., 2023; Hawu & Ismanto, 2024; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Niedlich et al., 2021; Qazi et al., 2022).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides literature review. Section 3 presents research method. Section 4 provides research findings and discussions. Section 5 wrap up the paper.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Construction of Community Perception

Perception can be understood as a psychological as well as a social process that involves receiving, selecting, processing, and interpreting various stimuli from the environment to form an understanding of an object (Cermeño-Aínsa, 2022; Li et al., 2025). This process is not only influenced by individual experiences, but is also formed through social interactions, cultural values, prevailing norms, and various information that develops in society (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023). Because it is influenced by these various factors, perception is dynamic and can change according to the experience and social conditions that a person faces (Cermeño-Aínsa, 2022; Li et al., 2025). In the context of education, public perception of schools has a very important role because it affects the level of trust, support, and consideration of parents in determining the educational institution chosen for their children (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Hussin et al., 2022; Niedlich et al., 2021; Shayo et al., 2021).

Society as a social group builds its perception of an institution through a process that is influenced by various interactions and shared experiences (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Ocasio, 2023). The assessments formed do not always depart from objective facts, but are often influenced by stories circulating in the environment, the experiences of alumni, the views of community leaders, interpersonal communication, and information conveyed through mass media and social media (Mundzir & Wiadi, 2025; Pawar, 2024; Shayo et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2025). These various information then accumulate and develop into a collective image that is accepted as a shared reality (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Maryati et al., 2026; Ocasio, 2023). Thus, public perception can be understood as the result of social construction that is constantly formed, maintained, and updated through the process of interaction in social life (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Shayo et al., 2021).

According to the concept of social construction introduced by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, social reality is formed through a dialectical process that includes three stages, namely externalization, objectification, and internalization (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021;



Maryati et al., 2026). At the externalization stage, individuals pour their understanding and experiences into social actions and interactions. The results of this process then undergo objectification when accepted and recognized by the community as a reality that is considered true (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023). Furthermore, through internalization, the reality that has been formed is absorbed into the individual's consciousness and affects his way of thinking and social behavior (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Maryati et al., 2026; Ocasio, 2023). These three stages take place continuously so as to form a collective perception of various social phenomena, including in interpreting the quality of a school (Maryati et al., 2026; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024).

From the perspective of social construction, the predicate of an outstanding school is not solely determined by objective measures such as the number of awards or high academic achievement (Greaves et al., 2023; Zhang, 2025). Assessment of school quality is often born from experiences and social meanings that develop in society over time (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023). When negative narratives or information dominate more than their achievements, people tend to form a less favorable view even though the school has empirically proven quality (Mundzir & Wiadi, 2025; Wulandari et al., 2025). On the other hand, schools with less prominent achievements can still gain a positive image if they gain strong recognition and legitimacy from their social environment (Géring et al., 2023; Niedlich et al., 2021; Qazi et al., 2022).

The formation of public perception is influenced by various factors, such as direct experience, interpersonal communication, social environment, local culture, information media, and geographical conditions (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Li et al., 2025; Shayo et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2025). The experiences of parents who have sent their children to school, recommendations from family members, and stories that develop in the neighborhood are often more reliable sources of information than official publications submitted by the school (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Mundzir & Wiadi, 2025; Wulandari et al., 2025). This shows that public perception is born from a combination of objective facts and subjective experiences that interact with each other in social life (Cermeño-Aínsa, 2022; Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Ocasio, 2023). In this study, the construction of public perception is used as the main concept to understand how the community interprets outstanding schools. The focus of the analysis is directed to the process of forming perceptions, the parties who play a role in creating meaning, information dissemination channels, and social dynamics that are the background for the emergence of public perception of SDN Sonoadi as an object of research.

2.2. Outstanding Schools and Academic Performance

An outstanding school can be understood as an educational institution that is continuously able to achieve superior performance in the implementation of education, both in the academic and non-academic realms (Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022; Zhang, 2025). Academic success is reflected in the achievement of learning outcomes, achievements in various scientific competitions, literacy and numeracy skills, and the quality of graduates produced (Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022; Piao, 2024; Zhang, 2025). On the other hand, non-academic achievements can be seen through the achievements of students in the fields of art, sports, religion, leadership, as well as various activities that support character formation and development of personal potential (Arifin & Hanif, 2026; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Singer & Lenhoff, 2022).

The success of a school does not solely depend on the ability of students, but is the result of synergy between effective leadership of the principal, teacher competence, conducive organizational culture, quality learning systems, and support from the community (Hardiyana et al., 2025; Kadarisman & Rahman, 2024; Khurniawan et al., 2021). Good integration among these various elements will form a solid quality culture and encourage the creation of continuous school achievement (Hardiyana et al.,

2025; Khurniawan et al., 2021). In the modern education management paradigm, school achievement is seen as an indicator of the effectiveness of educational organizations (Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022; Nadav et al., 2025). Schools that have won various awards are considered to have good governance, developing learning innovations, and adaptability to changes in education policies (Kadarisman & Rahman, 2024; Khurniawan et al., 2021). Therefore, achievement is often used as a measure of institutional success as well as a means of building public reputation (Géring et al., 2023; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Qazi et al., 2022).

Although academic achievement is one of the important considerations, people's decisions in choosing a school are not only based on this aspect (Greaves et al., 2023; Parma et al., 2024; Singer & Lenhoff, 2022). Various other factors, such as ease of access, socioeconomic conditions, proximity to residence, level of environmental safety, completeness of facilities, as well as experiences and recommendations from family and neighbors also influence the choice (Hailey, 2025; Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Schreurs & Chang Rundgren, 2021). This condition shows that the assessment of school quality is formed through a combination of objective indicators and social dynamics that develop in society (Hussin et al., 2022; Shayo et al., 2021).

In the context of SDN Sonoadi, the consistency of achieving various achievements throughout the 2021–2026 period reflects the quality of good education delivery (Kadarisman & Rahman, 2024; Khurniawan et al., 2021; Mejía-Rodríguez & Kyriakides, 2022). However, the decrease in the number of students shows that academic success is not always directly proportional to the increase in public interest in schools (Greaves et al., 2023; Houston & Henig, 2023; Parma et al., 2024). This condition indicates a gap between the quality of schools that can be objectively measured and the perception that develops in the social environment (Cermeno-Aínsa, 2022; Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Ocasio, 2023). Therefore, this study interprets an outstanding school not just as an institution that collects various awards, but as an institution that seeks to gain legitimacy through public trust and recognition (Géring et al., 2023; Niedlich et al., 2021; Qazi et al., 2022). The dynamics of the relationship between school achievement and public perception are the core of the study in this study (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Shayo et al., 2021).

2.3. Attractiveness of Educational Institutions

The attractiveness of an educational institution reflects its ability to encourage the public to choose the services provided (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022; Parma et al., 2024). This condition does not arise from one aspect alone, but is formed by a combination of internal and external factors. From the internal side, the quality of learning, teacher competence, school leadership, organizational culture, availability of facilities, and student achievement are important elements that determine institutional attractiveness (Hardiyana et al., 2025; Khurniawan et al., 2021; Nadav et al., 2025). As for the external side, the school's reputation, public views, environmental conditions, ease of access, and the image that develops in public spaces also affect the level of public interest in the school (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022; Hawu & Ismanto, 2024; Hussin et al., 2022; Qazi et al., 2022).

From the perspective of marketing educational services, schools are positioned as service providers that must be able to meet the expectations of the community. Good service quality will build satisfaction and foster public trust, which in turn encourages loyalty and increases the number of students in a sustainable manner (Hussin et al., 2022; Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022). The school's reputation itself is formed through consistency in providing quality services and positive experiences felt by the community (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022; Matahari & Lim, 2023; Qazi et al., 2022; Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022). A strong reputation can increase the competitiveness of schools in

the midst of educational competition, while a poor image has the potential to reduce public interest even though schools have various proud achievements (Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025; Hawu & Ismanto, 2024; Paderes & Yacapin, 2026).

The image of a school is also shaped by the effectiveness of public communication run by the institution. Conveying information through social media, publication of various achievements, relationships established with alumni, and community participation in school activities can strengthen positive perceptions of educational institutions (Mundzir & Wiadi, 2025; Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2024; Pawar, 2024; Wulandari et al., 2025). On the other hand, suboptimal communication has the potential to make people not know the various advantages that schools have (Paderes & Yacapin, 2026). In this study, the attractiveness of the institution is interpreted as a form of public trust which is reflected in the decision of parents to send their children to SDN Sonoadi. The decline in the number of students indicates that there are other social factors that also affect the attractiveness of the school, in addition to the various academic and non-academic achievements that have been achieved (Greaves et al., 2023; Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Parma et al., 2024; Shayo et al., 2021).

2.4. Disparity between Academic Performance and Institutional Attractiveness

Disparity can be understood as a state when two indicators that are conceptually related to each other actually show inconsistent results. In this study, the term refers to the gap between high school achievement and low public interest, which is shown by the continuous decline in the number of students (Houston & Henig, 2023; Parma et al., 2024). Theoretically, a good quality school should be able to gain a high level of public trust. However, in practice, people's decisions are not only based on academic quality, but are also influenced by various social aspects, such as perceptions, experiences, cultural values, developing stereotypes, and communication processes in the community (Hogan & Barnes, 2024; Hussin et al., 2022; Shayo et al., 2021).

The phenomenon of disparity shows that the quality of schools that can be measured objectively is not always directly proportional to public acceptance or recognition if it is not supported by positive public perception (Greaves et al., 2023; Houston & Henig, 2023; Qazi et al., 2022). On that basis, the study of disparities is important to understand the relationship between the real conditions that schools have and the social reality that is formed and developed in society (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023). The qualitative approach allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon because it is able to reveal experiences, meanings, and interpretations of society that cannot be represented through statistical data alone (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Wiesner, 2022). Through the process of interviews and observations, researchers can trace how social perceptions are formed, maintained, and inherited in people's lives over time (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Shayo et al., 2021).

2.5. Research Conceptual Framework

This research is based on the view that public perception of outstanding schools is not formed instantly, but is born from social processes that involve interaction, communication, shared experiences, and cultural values that develop in the surrounding environment (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023). This process plays a role in building public trust and influencing the attractiveness of an educational institution (Niedlich et al., 2021; Qazi et al., 2022). Although SDN Sonoadi has shown consistent academic and non-academic achievements through various achievements throughout 2021–2026, the number of students has actually decreased from year to year. This condition reflects the gap

between the real quality of schools and the perception that is developing in society (Greaves et al., 2023; Houston & Henig, 2023; Lee & Stacey, 2024).

Based on this framework, this study directs an analysis on the process of forming public perception through the stages of externalization, objectification, and internalization as stated by Berger and Luckmann (Fraser & Turcan, 2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Maryati et al., 2026; Ocasio, 2023). These three stages are used to uncover how the meaning of an outstanding school is constructed, acquired, and finally accepted as a social reality that influences people's choices towards an educational institution (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Shayo et al., 2021). In this context, the construction of public perception is positioned as the main focus, School Academic Performance as an Objective Reality, and Institutional Attractiveness as a Form of Public Trust, so that the relationship between the three is expected to provide a complete explanation of the disparities that occur at SDN Sonoadi.

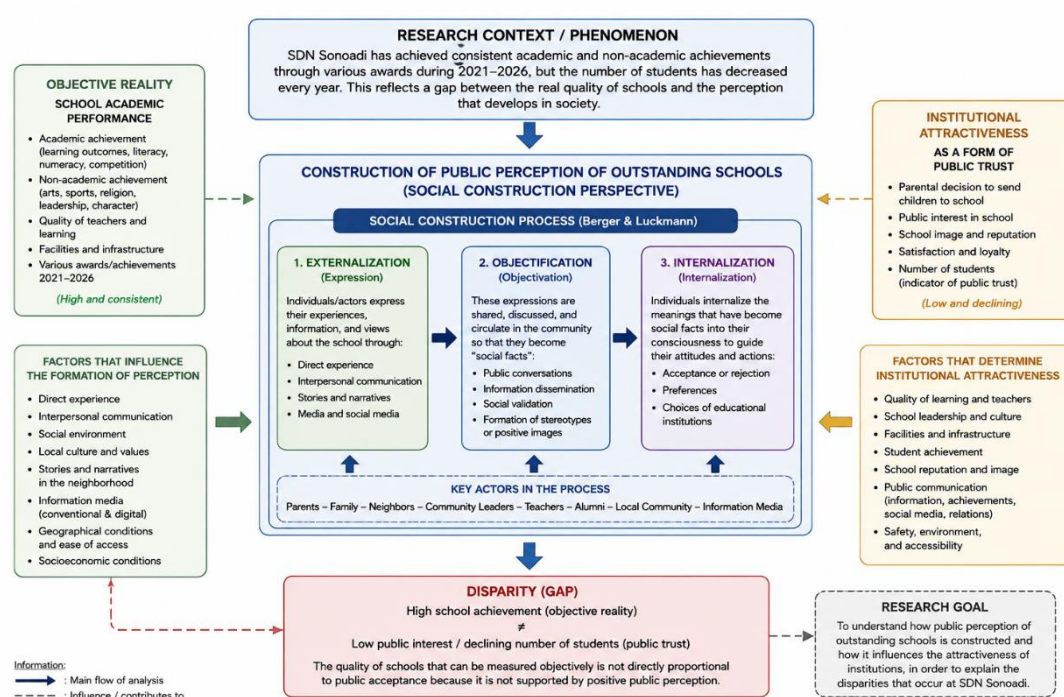


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Framework

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

This study applies a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine in depth the process of forming public perception of outstanding schools in real-world situations (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Wiesner, 2022). The selection of this approach aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the meaning, experience, and interpretation of the community towards SDN Sonoadi, which has good academic and non-academic achievements but faces a decline in the number of students. Through this approach, the research is able to trace various social dynamics that shape public perception, including interaction, communication, shared experiences, and socially constructed meanings (Fraser & Turcan,

2025; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Ocasio, 2023), so as to provide a more complete picture of the gap between the academic quality of schools and the level of institutional attractiveness.

3.2 Data Source and Sample

The subject of this research includes all parties who have knowledge and experience regarding the existence of SDN Sonoadi in the community. Because it uses a qualitative approach, the selection of informants is carried out purposively by considering their ability to provide relevant and in-depth information according to the focus of the research. The informants consist of school principals, teachers, school committees, parents of students, community leaders, alumni, and residents who have or are making SDN Sonoadi an alternative educational option. During the research process, the snowball sampling technique is also applied if other informants are found who have important information, so that data collection continues to be carried out until no new information is found or data saturation has reached it.

This study took SDN Sonoadi as the location of the study using the purposive technique because it was considered to have characteristics that were in accordance with the research objectives. Throughout the 2021-2026 period, the school has succeeded in making various achievements in the academic and non-academic fields, such as the East Java Provincial Islamic Education Olympiad, the Driving School Program, the Adiwiyata Program, as well as a number of awards in the fields of art, sports, religion, and educational innovation at the district level. However, these various achievements are not accompanied by an increase in the number of students. This condition makes SDN Sonoadi a relevant object to examine how public perception of outstanding schools is constructed.

Data collection in this study utilizes three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted directly with the informants to explore their experiences, views, and meanings regarding various factors that affect public perception of SDN Sonoadi. Observations are used to observe school conditions, organizational culture, interaction patterns between school residents, and various activities that contribute to the formation of the institution's image. The documentation study functions as a source of supporting data through the review of school achievement archives, student data, institution profiles, activity documentation, and various other documents related to the focus of research.

3.3. Validity Measurement

The validity of the data is guaranteed through the application of triangulation of sources, techniques, and time. Source triangulation is carried out by comparing information from various parties, such as school principals, teachers, school committees, parents, and community leaders. Technique triangulation is pursued by integrating the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, while time triangulation is carried out through data collection on different occasions to test the consistency of information. In addition, the researcher applies member checking by asking for confirmation from the informants on the results of the interpretation, so that the credibility and accuracy of the research findings can be maintained.

The data analysis in this study refers to the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model which includes three main stages, namely data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. At the condensation stage, the data is selected, classified, and focused according to the needs of the research. The processed data is then presented in the form of narratives, matrices, and

interthematic relationships so that the interpretation process can be carried out more systematically. Furthermore, conclusions were drawn up gradually throughout the study and continued to be verified using the perspective of Berger and Luckmann's social construction. This series of analyses is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the process of forming public perception of outstanding schools as well as reveal the factors behind the gap between academic performance and institutional attractiveness at SDN Sonoadi

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Result

The results of the study show that the public's perception of SDN Sonoadi as an outstanding school is formed through social processes involving individual experiences, daily interactions, communication between communities, and cultural values that develop in the surrounding environment. Based on interviews with school principals, teachers, parents of students, the community, and local leaders, it was found that there is a common understanding that an outstanding school is an institution that is able to produce excellent students in the academic and non-academic fields, supported by competent educators and good character formation. For parents, school success is largely measured by the achievements achieved by students, while the community also considers aspects of religiosity, school environment, and teacher quality as indicators of educational quality. Teachers themselves view that achievement reflects the quality of learning, although the success of students is also influenced by the family and social environment. The similarity of views shows that the concept of a school of achievement has become a collectively accepted social reality (Ocasio, 2023). However, when it is associated with the decision to choose a school, a more diverse dynamic emerges. Most of the informants admitted that SDN Sonoadi has good quality and is known through various academic and non-academic achievements, including success in the Islamic Religious Education Olympiad at the East Java Province level as well as various competitions in the fields of religion, sports, and art.

However, this recognition does not always lead to the decision to send children to school at SDN Sonoadi. Some people choose other schools because they follow family traditions, consider more intensive religious education, or because of emotional ties to certain institutions. In addition, the location factor, ease of access, education costs, and proximity of the school to the place of residence are also quite dominant considerations. In fact, there is a tendency for people to prefer schools that are located close even though the achievement is not higher. On the other hand, there is also symbolic consideration in the form of social prestige, where schools with large buildings and more popular names are often perceived as more attractive than schools that excel but are small. This shows that the attractiveness of an institution is shaped not only by tangible achievements, but also by the social significance inherent in the school (Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025).

In the perspective of Berger and Luckmann's social construction, the externalization stage can be seen from how society constructs perceptions through personal experiences, family stories, direct observation, and social communication (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Alumni of SDN Sonoadi, for example, admitted that they gained confidence in the school based on their own experiences. The experience then developed into common knowledge at the objectification stage, so that there was a collective assumption that SDN Sonoadi was an outstanding school, but lacked prestige due to its size and popularity. Furthermore, at the internalization stage, these perceptions become part of the community's perspective and influence their decisions in choosing a school for their children. Thus,

achievement as an objective reality is not always the main factor because it has interacted with the social constructs that develop in people's lives (Sun & Lim, 2023).

The results of the observations showed that the school culture was running well, the relationship between teachers and students was positive, and various learning facilities and extracurricular activities were optimally utilized. SDN Sonoadi also has excellent programs such as drumband and archery that are rare in other schools around it, with relatively affordable tuition fees. However, the publication of various school achievements is still limited so that information about these successes is more widely known by people who have direct proximity to the school. This condition causes their achievements to not fully develop into social capital that is able to increase the attractiveness of the institution. School documentation shows that throughout 2021–2026 SDN Sonoadi has consistently received various awards in the academic and non-academic fields.

However, in the same period, the number of students actually decreased gradually. This fact indicates that there is a gap between the quality of the school's objectives and the level of public trust which is reflected in the low interest in registering new students. The validity of the data is strengthened through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time, as well as member checking. Information from school principals, teachers, parents, communities, and local leaders was compared to obtain data consistency. The results of the interviews are also verified through field observation and documentation so that each finding receives support from various sources. Data collection at different times showed that the informant's answers were relatively consistent, while the member checking process confirmed that the researcher's interpretation was in accordance with the experiences and conditions felt by the informants. Thus, the results of the study meet the aspects of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Data analysis was carried out using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. At the condensation stage, all data from interviews, observations, and documentation were selected and grouped into main themes, such as the meaning of an outstanding school, public perception of SDN Sonoadi, determining factors for school selection, disparity between achievement and institutional attractiveness, sources of perception, influence of the social environment, school image, and strategies to increase institutional attractiveness. Furthermore, the data is presented in the form of a narrative and a thematic matrix to show the relationship between variables. The results of the analysis showed that public perception was influenced by a combination of various factors, including academic achievement, quality of teachers, school environment, family recommendations, alumni experience, accessibility, religious values, and social symbols such as school size and popularity.

The final verification process was carried out by comparing all field findings against Berger and Luckmann's social construction theories (Ocasio, 2023). The results show that the decline in the number of students at SDN Sonoadi cannot be explained solely by academic quality indicators, but rather related to the construction of collective perceptions formed through the process of externalization, objectification, and internalization. School achievement is recognized as an objective reality, but the appeal of the institution is determined more by the social meaning that develops through interpersonal communication, shared experiences, and symbolic legitimacy in the community environment. Therefore, increasing the number of students requires a strategy that not only focuses on achieving achievements, but also strengthening public communication, school branding, collaboration with community leaders, using social media, and strengthening relationships with parents and alumni so that the quality of the school can be translated into a positive collective perception and increase public trust.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. *Public Perception of Outstanding Schools Built Through Social Construction That Goes Beyond Academic Indicators*

The results of the study show that most people have almost the same view of the concept of outstanding schools. Schools are considered superior if they are able to produce quality students, achieve achievements in the academic and non-academic fields, are supported by competent educators, and succeed in shaping the character of students positively. Although academic achievement is still the main benchmark in assessing the quality of a school, the community also considers various other aspects beyond these achievements (Zhang, 2025).

According to Berger and Luckmann's perspective of social construction, societal perceptions are formed through a process of externalization that develops in everyday social interactions (Ardoin & Heimlich, 2021). The understanding of outstanding schools is born from personal experiences, stories in the family, alumni experiences, communication between communities, and information spread through social media. These experiences then undergo objectification and develop into a collective view of the characteristics of excellent schools. When this view is accepted as a common truth and used as a reference in determining educational choices, the internalization process takes place.

The findings of the study reveal that the public's assessment of school quality does not only rely on the achievements of the institution. The character of the teacher, the religious culture in the school, the emotional closeness to the educational environment, the comfortable learning atmosphere, and the experience of the alumni are also important considerations whose grades are almost comparable to academic indicators. This condition shows that the quality of schools is understood not only as an objective fact, but also as a social reality formed through the process of mutual meaning in the midst of society (Qazi et al., 2022).

The findings of this study confirm that public perception of educational institutions is born from social processes that develop through interaction and collective experience. Thus, the high achievement of a school does not necessarily produce social legitimacy if these achievements have not been understood and accepted as part of the school's common identity by the community (Géring et al., 2023). In the case of SDN Sonoadi, the various achievements have been recognized by the community, but the recognition has not fully encouraged them to make the school the main choice for their children's education.

Practically, the results of this study show that efforts to improve the quality of education need to be accompanied by strengthening the image and social meaning of schools in the community. It is not enough to rely only on academic achievement, schools also need to build a public narrative that links success to values that are valued by the community, such as character building, religious culture, a safe and comfortable environment, and the establishment of harmonious relationships between teachers, students, and parents (Chotimah et al., 2024).

4.2.2. *There is a Disparity between School Academic Performance and Institutional Attractiveness*

The second finding revealed that there was a gap between the real achievements of SDN Sonoadi and the level of public interest in the school. Although this school has continuously achieved various achievements, both in the academic and non-academic fields at the district, provincial, and national

levels, it has not been able to attract more students. In fact, the number of students enrolled actually shows a downward trend over time. This phenomenon shows that academic success is not always directly proportional to the increase in public interest in a school. In the perspective of social construction, there is a distance between real conditions and the way society interprets them. Although SDN Sonoadi is factually of good quality, the community's decision to choose a school is not only based on achievement, but also influenced by various other considerations that they construct subjectively (Sun & Lim, 2023).

The results of the interview revealed that the choice of school was not solely determined by academic quality. Various other considerations also play a role, such as family traditions, religious education needs, location, cost, ease of access, social environment, and the history of family members who have studied at a particular school. A number of informants even stated that the decision to choose another school was not because SDN Sonoadi was considered not good, but because they followed family choices or sought a more in-depth religious education.

These findings confirm that school selection is a process that is influenced by various interrelated social factors. In making decisions, parents not only refer to school achievement data, but also consider the culture they embrace, social identity, as well as shared experiences that develop in their environment. Therefore, academic achievement is only one consideration among many other factors. This study also shows the influence of symbolic aspects on public perception of school quality. Some people still judge the quality of the school from the size of the building, the number of students, the completeness of the facilities, and the level of popularity of the institution. This condition causes schools that have high achievement but are relatively small in size are often less in demand than schools that are physically larger and better known by the public (Hailey, 2025). (Hailey, 2025). The results of this study show that public interest in a school is not only formed from the quality of the educational services provided. Various social symbols that are perceived as markers of quality also affect people's judgment. Thus, the success of the school is not enough to be seen from its academic achievements, but also from its ability to gain trust and social recognition in the community (Indriati et al., 2025).

4.2.3. Social Communication, School Branding, and Social Environment Are Important Factors in Shaping Public Perception

The third finding indicates that the public's view of SDN Sonoadi is more shaped by interpersonal interactions, alumni experiences, recommendations from families, the influence of the social environment, and branding efforts carried out by the school. On the other hand, even though publications through social media and various promotional strategies have been implemented, the reach and effectiveness of the delivery of information is still not able to reach all groups of people optimally (Pawar, 2024). The results of the interviews revealed that information submitted by family, neighbors, alumni, and community leaders tended to obtain a higher level of trust than official information published by the school. These findings confirm that informal communication plays a very large role in shaping public perception of an educational institution.

According to Berger and Luckmann's perspective, social communication is the main means by which a reality can undergo a process of objectification and internalization. Information about schools that continues to circulate and be repeated in community interactions gradually develops into a common knowledge that is accepted as a social truth. As a result, assessments of school quality are often influenced more by experiences shared through social networks than by statistical data on school

performance (Masrom et al., 2021). This research also shows that school branding efforts have not completely succeeded in shifting the perception that has long developed in society. Some residents still associate superior schools with the completeness of physical facilities or the high number of students. The findings indicate that branding strategies should not only focus on the publication of achievements, but also on the formation of an institutional identity that is in harmony with the needs, expectations, and values that live in society (Hawu & Ismanto, 2024).

Practically, schools need to implement a more participatory communication strategy by involving alumni, community leaders, village organizations, parents, and local communities as partners in building a positive image. In addition, the delivery of information about student achievements, superior programs, character development, and school contributions to the community needs to be carried out more intensively and sustainably in order to strengthen public trust.

4.2.4. Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study reinforce the results of previous studies that show that parents' choices of school are not solely based on academic achievement. Various social, cultural, and psychological considerations also shape the decision, including the image of the school, the atmosphere of the learning environment, recommendations from family or relatives, and the values that develop in society. The findings of this study corroborate the results of previous studies that viewed public perception of schools as a combination of objective reality and subjective experience. However, this study provides a more comprehensive explanation by revealing the social construction process behind the formation of this perception. While quantitative research generally focuses on the interconnectedness between variables, this study highlights the social dynamics that explain why high school achievement is not always followed by increased institutional attractiveness in the eyes of the public.

The results of this study are in line with various studies on education marketing that place word-of-mouth communication, institutional reputation, and relationships with the community as important factors in building public trust. However, this study shows that social communication has a broader role, which is not only to convey information, but also to be a space for the formation of a social meaning regarding the quality and image of a school. The study also revealed that social symbols, such as the size of school buildings, popularity levels, and the number of students, also influence the way people assess an educational institution. These findings show that assumptions about school quality are often built based on symbolic indicators that do not always reflect the quality of education in real terms. Therefore, this study enriches the study of the sociology of education by showing that the relationship between school achievement and institutional attractiveness does not take place directly, but is formed through the process of social construction that develops in society.

Although this research is able to explain in depth the process of forming public perception of outstanding schools, there are still some limitations. The research only focused on SDN Sonoadi so that the findings obtained were influenced by local social, cultural, and geographical conditions and were not intended to be generalized statistically. In addition, the relatively limited number of informants has made the diversity of public views not fully accommodated, even though it has involved teachers, parents, the general public, and community leaders. This study also only examines public elementary schools without comparing them with private schools or madrasas, so the differences in characteristics between types of educational institutions have not been thoroughly described. In addition, data collection carried out in a certain period has not allowed observation of changes in public perception

over time, even though social perceptions are dynamic and can develop along with changes in social conditions and education policies.

5. Concluding Remarks and Recommendation

This study concludes that public perception of outstanding schools is the result of social construction formed through the interaction between individual experiences, inter-community communication, cultural values, social environment, and information circulating around them. Although SDN Sonoadi is recognized as having good quality education and consistently achieving academic and non-academic achievements at the district, provincial, and national levels, this recognition has not directly increased public interest in sending children to the institution. The findings of the study show that there is a gap between the objective quality of schools and the subjective perceptions that are developing in society. The choice of school is not only based on academic achievement, but is also influenced by various social considerations, such as family traditions, religious orientation, proximity to location, alumni experience, environmental recommendations, institutional image, and social symbols attached to the school.

Within the framework of Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, these conditions are formed through the stages of externalization, objectification, and internalization that produce a collective meaning of an outstanding school. This study also revealed that social communication, shared experiences, and interactions between communities are more dominant in shaping perceptions than official information from schools. On the other hand, the branding strategy and publication of achievements that have not run optimally have made the various achievements of SDN Sonoadi have not fully developed into social capital that is able to increase the attractiveness of the institution. Thus, the success of a school is not only determined by the achievements achieved, but also by its ability to build social legitimacy, public trust, and a positive image that is in line with societal expectations. Therefore, the objective quality of schools needs to be communicated effectively so that they can be constructed into a positive collective perception and encourage increased public trust and interest in educational institutions.

This research has provided an in-depth picture of the process of forming public perception of outstanding schools, but it still has a number of limitations. The focus of the research, which is only on SDN Sonoadi, makes the findings more representative of the local social, cultural, and geographical conditions so that they cannot be used as a general overview for all elementary schools in Indonesia. In addition, the limited number of informants allows there to be other points of view that have not been accommodated. This study also has not compared public schools with private schools, madrasas, or other educational institutions that have different characteristics, so that the variation in factors that shape public perception between institutions has not been fully described. Another limitation lies in the time span of the research that has not allowed the observation of changes in public perception in a sustainable manner. Therefore, further research is suggested to expand the study location by involving various types of schools and community backgrounds in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of public perception of educational institutions.

The use of a mixed methods approach is also worth considering to combine the depth of qualitative analysis with the ability to generalize quantitative data. In addition, the next study can further review the influence of social media, digital communication, alumni networks, and school branding strategies in shaping the image of institutions in the digital era. From a practical perspective, schools need to strengthen public communication, optimize the publication of achievements and excellent programs, establish closer collaboration with parents, alumni, and community leaders, and develop a branding strategy that not only highlights academic achievements, but also character values, religiosity,

and social contributions. With this step, the objective quality of the school can develop into a strong social legitimacy and continuously increase the attractiveness of the institution in the eyes of the public.

5.1. Recommendations for Future Research

Departing from these limitations, future research is suggested to involve more schools with diverse characteristics in order to obtain a broader picture. The use of a comparative approach can help to find the factors that consistently shape public perceptions in various educational contexts. In addition, the application of the design *Mixing method* It is worth considering because it is able to combine the depth of qualitative analysis with the generalizing power of quantitative approaches (Zhou et al., 2024), so that the magnitude of the influence of each identified factor can be measured more objectively. In addition, longitudinal research is needed to understand how public perceptions change over time, especially after schools have undertaken branding strategies, strengthened public communication, or innovated certain educational programs (Naheen & Elsharnouby, 2024).

Future research can explore the role of social media, digital communication, and alumni networks in shaping the image of a school in the digital era. As the role of information technology expands in daily life, these factors can be key in attracting public attention to educational institutions in the future. Overall, this study emphasizes that the success of a school does not solely depend on measurable academic quality, but also on the school's ability to build social legitimacy through the construction of good perceptions. Therefore, efforts to improve the quality of education must be combined with public communication strategies, institutional branding, and community participation, so that school achievements are truly translated into greater trust and interest from the public.

Statement of Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author used generative artificial intelligence tools to support the scientific writing process. Grammarly was used to check grammar, refine writing style, and improve clarity in scientific writing. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented in this study are the sole responsibility of the author.

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