

Product Differentiation Strategy of Educational Services in Attracting Prospective New Students

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Abstract (10 pt)	Article History
<p>This study aims to analyze the product differentiation strategy of educational services implemented by MAS YBH Cimindi to attract prospective students. The research is grounded in the phenomenon of declining student enrollment over recent years, which is suspected to be due to suboptimal marketing strategies-particularly the lack of distinctive competitive advantages. Inadequate promotional efforts, the absence of structured flagship programs, and the lack of a unique institutional identity are considered contributing factors to the decreasing public interest. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and documentation as data collection techniques. Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Philip Kotler's theory of product differentiation in educational services served as the analytical framework, encompassing nine key indicators: form, features, performance quality, conformance quality, durability, reliability, repairability, style, and design. The findings reveal that while internal initiatives-such as a tahfidz class and computer skills training-have been launched, they have yet to be integrated into a formal institutional strategy. The absence of a clear positioning and limited promotional efforts have hindered MAS YBH Cimindi from establishing a unique perception among the public. Nevertheless, the potential for developing a differentiation strategy remains high, considering the lack of direct competitors in the Islamic senior high school (madrasah aliyah) category within the region. This study recommends that the institution formulate a well-directed and collaborative differentiation strategy to enhance its competitiveness.</p>	<p>Received: 30 Mei 2025 Revised : 5 April 2025 Accepted: 30 April 2025</p>
	<p>Keywords: Differentiation Strategy, Educational Service Products, Educational Marketing, Madrasah Aliyah, New Student Interest.</p>

Introduction

Competition in the world of education is now increasingly competitive. Educational institutions are required to not only provide learning services, but also be able to create advantages that distinguish them from other institutions (Munir, 2018) .

This uniqueness is the main selling point that influences the decision of prospective

students and parents in choosing an educational institution. Without clear differentiation, an institution will have difficulty building a strong position in the midst of the many choices available (Nugroho & Yulianti, 2019) . Therefore, a differentiation strategy is no longer just an option, but a strategic necessity in education marketing management. The differentiation strategy of education service products is one of the important approaches to attract prospective students while building a strong *positioning* in the eyes of the public(Frederiksen, 2024) . This differentiation includes various aspects, ranging from the form of services, superior features, quality of performance, to the design and style of educational services provided. Without a clear differentiation strategy, educational institutions are vulnerable to losing their appeal and have difficulty competing, even in environments that actually lack direct competitors (Mundir, 2016)

MAS YBH Cimindi is the only Madrasah Aliyah in Cigugur sub-district. Geographically, this position should be an advantage because it has no direct competitors at the MA level within the sub-district. However, the reality in the field shows that there are serious problems in attracting new students. Based on preliminary data from field observations, the number of applicants in this madrasah has experienced a significant decline in the last two years. In the 2023/2024 academic year, the number of applicants reached 39 students, but decreased to only 37 students in the 2024/2025 academic year. This decline indicates that although the education program has been running, there is no flagship program that explicitly differentiates and attracts MAS YBH Cimindi in the eyes of the community. This madrasah does not yet have a distinctive service identity, which should be presented through an appropriate and planned differentiation strategy.

The urgency of this research lies in the strategic need of MAS YBH Cimindi to immediately create distinctive and valuable added value amidst the stagnation of the number of students. Differentiation of educational service products is not only a marketing strategy, but also a long-term strategy to improve service quality, institutional reputation, and operational sustainability of madrasah(Lenti et al., 2020) . In the midst of the swift flow of information and the many educational options offered

by other institutions, even though they are outside the sub-district area, people will still choose schools that are considered superior and in accordance with the needs of their children. Therefore, this research is important to assist madrasahs in designing differentiation strategies based on local needs and internal potential.

Against this background, this study aims to identify the factors that have not optimized the differentiation strategy of educational service products at MAS YBH Cimindi, and formulate appropriate and relevant strategies based on Philip Kotler's differentiation theory. This research is expected to make a real contribution in the form of strategic recommendations for the madrasah, so that it can strengthen competitiveness and attract new prospective students more effectively.

Material and Methods

This research uses a *descriptive qualitative approach* that aims to describe systematically, deeply, and factually about the differentiation strategy of educational service products at MAS YBH Cimindi (Sugiyono, 2024). This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring social phenomena in the context of education in a more contextual and narrative manner, without being fixated on numbers or statistics alone. The research was conducted from March 18 to March 28, 2025 at MAS YBH Cimindi which is located at Jl. Raya Cigugur No. 09, Cigugur District, Kuningan Regency, West Java.

Results and Discussion

Product Analysis of Educational Services at MAS YBH Cimindi

The educational service products offered by MAS YBH Cimindi are still generic and do not reflect strong differentiation characteristics, as said by Dede Sadid M, S.Ag as a teaching staff as well as Assistant Headmaster in the field of curriculum. According to Kotler (2005), differentiation is an effort to create uniqueness and excellence that is not owned by competitors, with the aim of building the perception of more value in the minds of consumers. If it is associated with the context of education, then educational services that do not have differentiation will be difficult to compete, especially in an

increasingly competitive environment where other schools have begun to build identities and superior programs that attract public interest (P. Kotler et al., 2005)

The results of initial observations and interviews showed that the programs at MAS YBH Cimindi were not designed to meet specific market segments. Based on the results of the interview, Dede Sadid M, S.Ag gave the view that MAS YBH Cimindi in the previous year had a superior program and ran as it should. However, since the presence of secondary schools, it has experienced a very significant decline. The curriculum is delivered in a standardized form, with a traditional learning approach that does not emphasize creativity or innovation. On the other hand, extracurricular activities such as PMR, scouts, and futsal have been running but have not been positioned as part of the school's differentiation strategy.

In analyzing the differentiation of educational service products at MAS YBH Cimindi, the researcher uses product differentiation indicators from Philip Kotler (P. Kotler et al., 2005) which consist of nine elements: Product, Reliability, Durability, Repairability, Style, Design, Features, Performance, and Quality. Each indicator is analyzed based on field data and its relevance to the institutional context.

1. Visuals and Infrastructure at MAS YBH Cimindi

Physically, the buildings and learning support facilities at MAS YBH Cimindi are still relatively simple. The facilities available tend to be limited to basic learning needs such as standard-sized classrooms and conventional learning equipment. There is no science laboratory, ICT laboratory, or other thematic spaces that can support more modern, active and contextual learning activities. This is certainly a challenge in attracting new students, especially in an era when visualization and comfort of the learning environment are part of the main considerations of prospective students and parents.

Furthermore, these physical limitations affect the *positioning* of the madrasah in the minds of prospective students and parents. Within the framework of Zeithaml's (1988) *perceived value* theory, consumer perceptions of quality are often influenced by visible physical cues (Zeithaml, 1988). In other words, school buildings and facilities become a visual "*representation*" of the quality of education offered. When these cues

are weak, it will be difficult for madrasahs to compete visually and emotionally with other institutions that have more representative facilities, although in terms of educational substance they are not necessarily superior.

2. Lack of Flagship Services as a Barrier to Differentiation

The features of educational services at MAS YBH Cimindi to date are still general in nature and have not shown any significant differentiation efforts. The curriculum still refers to the national and religious standards that are generally applicable, without any strengthening of additional programs such as superior classes, acceleration programs, digital-based learning, or assistance services to the college level. When prospective students and parents are now increasingly selective in choosing educational institutions, the limited features of such services become an obstacle in building madrasah competitiveness.

In a service management perspective, Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) emphasize that augmented services or additional features in a service have an important role in increasing consumers' perceived value (Kurubit, 2021). These features not only expand the functional benefits received by customers, but also strengthen the institution's image as an innovative and responsive institution to market needs. In the context of education, additional features can be excellent programs such as yellow book studies, tahfidz Qur'an, foreign language classes, or integration of technology in learning, which are directly able to attract certain market segments.

Efforts towards the development of excellent services have actually been pioneered at MAS YBH Cimindi. The Deputy Head of Curriculum said that the "Study of the Yellow Book and Tahfidz Qur'an" program had been proposed as part of a strategy to improve the quality of services. However, this initiative has not yet been realized due to limited funds and implementation time. This reflects that although there is managerial awareness of the importance of excellent features, limited human and financial resources are still the main obstacles in their execution.

The absence of these excellent programs has a direct impact on the *positioning* of MAS YBH Cimindi in the eyes of prospective students. This madrasah has not been able to highlight the specific advantages that distinguish it from other educational

institutions, especially those in the same segment in the Cimindi area. According to Porter (1998), one of the main strategies in facing competition is through product or service differentiation. Without any distinguishing features, madrasahs tend to be in a "red ocean" full of competition without clear added value (Porter, 1998)

3. Quality of Learning Outcomes and Challenges in Educational Outcomes

In terms of academic performance, MAS YBH Cimindi can be categorized as being at a moderate level. Based on data from 2023, the average final score of students in grade XII was 74, with a 100% pass rate. At first glance, this shows that the learning process is stable and there are no major obstacles in delivering material or evaluating learning. However, when viewed from a broader outcome - specifically in the context of continuing studies to higher education - there are indications that the results have not been fully optimized. Only around 7% of graduates managed to continue to public universities, while the majority of graduates chose to work directly, study at private universities at affordable costs, or did not continue their studies at all.

Therefore, a comprehensive strategy is needed to develop stronger educational outcomes. The strengthening of tutoring, cooperation with training institutions or guidance to enter state universities, and the addition of academic program features based on student interests are important steps. These efforts will not only increase the percentage of students who continue their education to higher levels, but will also strengthen the *positioning* of MAS YBH Cimindi as a results-oriented and highly competitive madrasah.

4. Insufficient Personalization of Services as a Challenge to Educational Quality

MAS YBH Cimindi has not yet optimally integrated its educational programs and services with the individual needs of students. One prominent indicator is the unavailability of an interest and talent assessment system that can be used as a basis for designing differentiated educational services. Each student basically has unique potential and tendencies, but there is no formal instrument designed by the madrasah to systematically identify these differences. This is a challenge in providing services that are truly responsive to the diversity of learners.

The absence of this personalization-based approach shows that MAS YBH Cimindi has not fully implemented the principle of conformance quality as stated by Kotler and Keller (2016), namely that the quality of a service lies in the extent to which the service conforms to the expectations and needs of users (P. Kotler & Keller, 2016). In this case, students and parents as "education consumers" expect services that are adaptive to students' personal characteristics. If these expectations are not met, there will be a gap between the perceived quality and the reality received.

In an era of increasing competition between educational institutions, such a mass and uniform approach can actually become an institutional weakness. While other madrasahs have begun to offer superior programs based on talents and interests such as tahfidz classes, science classes, or vocational-based skills classes, MAS YBH Cimindi still tends to put forward general programs. This has the potential to weaken the attractiveness of the madrasah in the eyes of prospective students and parents who want more targeted services. As emphasized by Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler (2017), service differentiation in the service sector must be built on a deep understanding of customer preferences to generate competitive value (Wilson et al., 2020).

Strategically, personalization of services based on interests and talents can be a value proposition that distinguishes MAS YBH Cimindi from similar institutions in the Cimindi area. As stated by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), personalized learning experiences will increase student satisfaction and engagement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In the long run, this will not only impact on the quality of learning outcomes, but also on the madrasah's reputation as a progressive, inclusive and innovative institution.

5. Weak Durability of Graduates' Competencies

Durability can be interpreted as the relevance and sustainability of the benefits of education services felt by students even after they graduate. At MAS YBH Cimindi, data and observations show that most alumni work in the informal sector or continue their education at boarding schools. Although this does not necessarily reflect the failure of the institution, it does indicate that the output of education has not been fully directed towards strengthening long-term capacity that is relevant to the needs of the labor market or the modern business world.

The absence of long-term practical skills programs, such as entrepreneurship training, digitalization, or vocational-based expertise, is one of the causes of the low durability of graduate competencies. They are not equipped with adaptive skills that can increase competitiveness in a changing world of work. In fact, according to Kotler and Keller, durability is one of the core attributes that consumers value highly, especially when they invest time and resources in products or services that are expected to provide sustainable benefits (P. Kotler & Keller, 2016). In the world of education, this translates into the success of schools or madrasah in equipping students with life skills and employability skills that are not only useful in school, but also after they enter the community. Without this provision, graduates are prone to stagnation or difficulty in social mobility. Along with the increasing demands of the world of work and social dynamics, educational institutions are required to not only become teaching centers, but also empowerment centers.

6. Limited Service Reliability in Guaranteeing Educational Results

Reliability in education services not only includes consistency in carrying out the teaching-learning process, but also includes the institution's ability to fulfill service promises communicated to students and parents. At MAS YBH Cimindi, the learning process is relatively stable. Teachers are consistently present, learning materials are delivered as scheduled, and regular assessments are conducted periodically. In this aspect, the madrasah has demonstrated a basic commitment to organized and administratively reliable education services.

However, service reliability has not been extended to guarantee service outcomes. There is no intensive guidance program for college entrance, achievement classes, or career assistance that can guarantee academic achievement and the future of graduates in a more directed manner. In fact, as stated by Lovelock and Wirtz (2017), reliability is also related to the extent to which an institution is able to keep the promises made to its consumers—in this case, the promise of providing education that has a real impact on students' futures (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2017). The absence of this guarantee of results makes education services seem to "run as it is", and has not provided a sense of security or more trust for parents or prospective students who want

a clear direction of education. In a climate of competition between educational institutions, it is not enough to show reliability through operational routines, but must be proven through concrete achievements such as SNBT graduation, skills certification, or student portfolios that can be exhibited as service results.

7. Low Complaint Response System and Its Implications for Service Culture

In services including education, repairability refers to the institution's ability to respond, repair and resolve service discrepancies or customer complaints effectively. However, in MAS YBH Cimindi, this aspect is still relatively weak. When there are complaints from students - whether related to learning methods, facilities, or internal classroom dynamics - there is no formal system designed to accommodate and follow up on these aspirations. Communication channels between students and madrasah management are still informal and tend to depend on personal closeness with teachers or homeroom teachers.

This shows that there is no structured feedback loop in the madrasah service management system. In fact, according to the theory of customer service management proposed by Zeithaml, superior service institutions must have a fast and flexible correction mechanism so that any service errors can be corrected immediately before they have a wider impact (Zeithaml, 1988). In the context of education, this could be in the form of student forums, suggestion boxes, periodic surveys of learning satisfaction, or student complaints units that are official and systematically followed up. This low repairability is not only a technical problem, but also closely related to organizational culture. Educational environments that do not open up space for feedback tend to be closed to change and difficult to develop. This can lead to a perception gap between management and service users (students/parents) and make it difficult for madrasahs to identify weak points in their services.

8. Undefined Visual Identity and Its Impact on Institutional Appeal

Style in the context of education marketing is not only a matter of physical appearance, but also reflects the identity, character, and the way an institution communicates and builds an image in the eyes of the public. However, this aspect has not been strategically managed by MAS YBH Cimindi. The visual identity of the

madrasah is still generic - from the design of brochures, banners for new student admissions, to the appearance of social media that has minimal allure and has not shown a distinctive characteristic that distinguishes it from other institutions. In fact, according to Kotler and Keller, style is an important element in service product differentiation because it serves as the first attention grabber (P. Kotler & Keller, 2008). In the world of education, this style can be in the form of visual branding (color, logo, uniform design), public communication style, to the distinctive atmosphere felt when interacting directly with madrasah. If managed well, style can form a strong initial perception and increase attractiveness in the eyes of prospective students and parents.

9. Educational Program Design That Is Still Generic

Design in the context of education refers to how a learning program is strategically designed to produce unique services, and answer the needs of students and their environment. However, in reality, the design of educational programs at MAS YBH Cimindi still runs in a conventional pattern, based on the national curriculum without many modifications that adjust to the local context and the demands of the times. There has been no explicit effort to design curriculum or additional programs that are able to maximize the potential of the surrounding area, for example through the development of agribusiness, pesantren entrepreneurship, or sharia-based digital marketing. This indicates that madrasahs have not utilized design *differentiation* as a strategy to increase their competitiveness. In fact, according to Kotler and Keller, product or service design is the most powerful form of differentiation, because it not only distinguishes the external appearance, but also the substance and value contained in it (P. J. Kotler & Keller, 2007). In the world of education, design includes curriculum, learning methods, evaluation models, and approaches to student character and skill development.

Differentiation Strategies Implemented and Featured Programs

Based on the results of in-depth interviews with the leadership of MAS YBH Cimindi, it can be concluded that there is a seed of awareness of the importance of designing excellent programs that can be a differentiator between this institution and other educational institutions in the Cigugur area. One of the discourses that began to be

raised was the development of tahfidz Al-Qur'an classes as a form of integration between formal education and strengthening Islamic spiritual values. In addition, the madrasah has also begun to explore computer-based skills training as a response to 21st century skills needs (Rasmanah et al., 2024). However, these two programs have not yet been formally made part of the Madrasah's Strategic Plan (Renstra). Their implementation is still spontaneous and dependent on individual teacher initiatives or volunteer participation, rather than the result of systematic planning involving all institutional elements.

When referring to the differentiation approach in education marketing as proposed by Kotler and Keller (2016), an effective differentiation strategy must be based on a deep understanding of the market and internalized into all managerial processes of the institution (P. Kotler & Keller, 2016). In other words, efforts to present superior programs are not enough only at the stage of intention or experimentation, but must be made the main identity of the institution through the process of formulating the right *positioning*. This is important so that madrasahs do not just imitate what other institutions are doing, but are able to form advantages that are authentic and relevant to the social context of the surrounding community. For example, *positioning* as "Qur'anic Digital Madrasah" or "Madrasah Aliyah with Islamic and Technological Competence" can be a clear differentiating direction in shaping public perception.

Awareness of the need to build the uniqueness of the institution through differentiation strategies is actually starting to grow, although to a limited extent. Some teachers reported that they have proposed the idea of rebranding the identity of the madrasah, emphasizing the distinctiveness based on tahfidz, digital training, and character strengthening. However, there is no institutional policy that makes this strategy a long-term direction. This indicates that the differentiation strategy at MAS YBH Cimindi is still running sporadically and has not yet become part of the institution's grand narrative.

In the context of education strategic management theory, differentiation requires not only creative ideas but also high organizational awareness to move all elements consistently. This is in line with the opinion of Henry Mintzberg (2000) which states that

a successful strategy is not only built in a meeting room, but is born from an agreement on meaning and collective action that forms the culture of the organization. Therefore, although there are initiatives from some teachers, without the support of a solid management system and the involvement of internal and external stakeholders in a synergistic manner, the differentiation strategy will be difficult to become an impactful reality.

Table 1.

Data on the number of new students and the number of students

Year	New Students	Number of Students
2020	66	176
2021	76	198
2022	37	165
2023	39	132
2024	37	107

The declining trend of new student interest in MAS YBH Cimindi is a strong indicator that the institution's image has not been well established in the minds of the community. Based on internal data obtained from the New Student Admission (PPDB) committee, the data on new student admissions at MAS YBH Cimindi for the last five years shows a significant downward trend. In 2020, the number of new students was recorded at 66 people. This figure had increased in 2021 to 76 students - the highest peak in that period. However, after that there was a drastic decline in 2022, with only 37 students enrolling. Although there was a slight increase in 2023 to 39 students, the number fell back to 37 in 2024. The consistent decline in enrollment since 2021 reflects serious challenges in the attractiveness of madrasahs in the eyes of prospective students and parents.

This can be caused by various factors, ranging from the limitations of excellent programs, not optimal promotion strategies, to the intense competition between educational institutions in the surrounding area. If this trend continues, it is feared that it will affect the operational sustainability and reputation of the madrasah in the long run. This condition should be a warning for management to conduct a thorough evaluation of the marketing approach, educational services, and differentiation of service products offered by madrasah. Program innovation, strengthening institutional

identity, and improving service quality based on market needs are important steps to reverse this downward trend in a more positive direction (Ilmi & Nukhbatillah, 2023).

This phenomenon cannot be solely explained by external factors such as demographics or the economy of the community, but rather the absence of a special attraction that distinguishes this madrasah from similar institutions in the surrounding area. Interviews with several prospective students who chose other schools showed that they did not find any striking differences or distinctive advantages that made MAS YBH Cimindi the first choice. This is in line with Kotler's opinion (2005) which emphasizes that differentiation serves to shape the perception of value in the minds of consumers. If a product or service does not offer something unique, then consumers will easily switch to other options that seem more promising. In the case of education, consumers not only consider the curriculum, but also the supporting programs, quality of graduates, facilities, and reputation of the institution. Therefore, without strong differentiation, the competitiveness of madrasahs will continue to decline, especially in an era where people are increasingly aware of the importance of quality and excellence in educational services.

But on the other hand, this madrasah has great opportunities that have not been maximized. Its strategic location as the only Madrasah Aliyah in Cigugur sub-district gives it a strong bargaining position. The absence of direct competitors in the MA category can be utilized to form a specific and strong *positioning*. In addition, the support from Bina Hasanah Foundation can also be a social and institutional capital to encourage strategic innovation. Another opportunity is the trend of people starting to look for religious-based education but still adaptive to the development of technology and skills. Therefore, differentiation that combines Islamic values, digitalization of learning, and empowerment of life skills can be a very relevant and promising strategy to build madrasah competitiveness in the future.

Conclusion

Based on the research results regarding the differentiation strategy of educational service products at MAS YBH Cimindi, it can be concluded that although

there was an initial awareness from the madrasah to form superior programs such as tahfidz classes and computer-based skills training, these efforts have not been structured in systematic institutional planning documents. The differentiation strategy is still personal and has not yet become part of the institution's strategic management. This has led to the madrasah's weak competitiveness in attracting new prospective students. In the perspective of Kotler's product differentiation theory, competitive advantage will emerge when educational institutions are able to present services that are unique, relevant and of greater value than competitors. However, until now, MAS YBH Cimindi has not succeeded in displaying these characteristics consistently, both in terms of service forms, features, styles, and quality of performance.

This declining public interest in the madrasah suggests a gap between market expectations and institutional offerings. Interviews with prospective students and the community reinforce the notion that MAS YBH does not yet have a significantly differentiating appeal from other schools in the vicinity. This emphasizes the urgency to immediately devise a more targeted, data-driven, and integrated differentiation strategy into the madrasah management system . On the other hand, the existence of the madrasah as the only MA in Cigugur sub-district, plus the support of the foundation and the potential of available human resources, is a great opportunity for the development of a stronger and more sustainable institutional identity.

Based on these findings, the researcher provides several recommendations that can be considered by the madrasah:

1. It is important for madrasahs to formulate a clear institutional *positioning*, for example by carrying the identity as a madrasa based on tahfidz technology or 21st century skills.
2. The excellent program that has been initiated must be formalized in a strategic plan and annual program, so that its sustainability does not depend on certain individuals.
3. The establishment of a madrasah product development and promotion team is urgently needed, to integrate service development with marketing and public communication strategies.

4. Capacity building of teachers and staff in the areas of curriculum innovation, learning digitalization, and promotion management is also a priority, so that all elements of the institution move in one vision.
5. Expanding cooperation with external partners such as industry, universities, and local communities can also increase the credibility and relevance of the programs offered.

As for future researchers, it is recommended to expand the scope of research by comparing differentiation strategies between several educational institutions in one region, so as to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics of competition in the religious secondary education sector. Further research can also examine the effect of differentiation strategies on student and parent satisfaction, or analyze the effectiveness of promotional media used by educational institutions in shaping public perceptions. Thus, the study of educational marketing management not only focuses on the conceptual level, but also makes a real contribution to institutional development in the field.

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