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Muslim School Leadership Practices and Autism Inclusive Education in Malaysia: A Mixed Method Analysis of Parental Trust and Educational Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationships among Muslim school leadership practices, autism inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes within Malaysian Muslim schools. The study responds to the growing need for Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions to support autistic learners through practices that combine educational inclusion, ethical leadership, and institutional trust. An explanatory sequential mixed-method design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 300 respondents comprising school leaders, teachers, and parents, followed by semi-structured interviews with 18 participants to explain the statistical findings. The quantitative phase used PLS-SEM to test six hypotheses. The results showed that all hypothesised relationships were supported. Muslim school leadership practices had the strongest effect on leadership communication, $\beta = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$, followed by autism inclusive education, $\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$. Autism inclusive education significantly influenced parental trust, $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$, while leadership communication also strengthened parental trust, $\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$. Parental trust strongly influenced educational marketing outcomes, $\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$, while autism inclusive education had a smaller but significant direct effect on educational marketing outcomes, $\beta = 0.24$, $p = 0.001$. The qualitative findings identified five principal themes: compassionate leadership, transparent communication, limited teacher readiness, autism inclusion as Islamic ethical responsibility, and parent experience as a source of school reputation. The findings indicate that autism inclusion in Muslim schools is not only a special education issue. It is also a leadership, communication, trust, ethical, and reputational issue. The study contributes to inclusive Islamic education by showing how Muslim school leadership can strengthen parental trust and institutional credibility through meaningful support for autistic learners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with differences in communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, sensory response, and behavioural patterns (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Globally, autism has become a growing concern for education systems because autistic children require learning environments that are structured, emotionally safe, and responsive to individual developmental needs. The World Health Organization reported that, in 2021, about 1 in 127 persons worldwide had autism, while also noting that prevalence estimates differ across countries and remain less certain in many low- and middle-income contexts (World Health Organization, 2025). (World Health Organization)

In Malaysia, awareness of autism and inclusive education has increased through public health screening, parental advocacy, and attention to education policy (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2023; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2021). However, awareness does not necessarily lead to effective school practice. Inclusive education requires more than access to classrooms. It requires teacher readiness, leadership support, adaptive pedagogy, communication with parents, and institutional willingness to accommodate different learning needs (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO also frames inclusion as a response to exclusion based on ability, background, and learner differences, which makes autism inclusion part of a broader educational equity agenda. (UNESCO)

For Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions, autism inclusion carries an additional ethical dimension. These schools are expected to deliver academic learning while also reflecting Islamic values such as amanah, adil, ihsan, compassion, patience, and moral responsibility (Beekun & Badawi, 2018; Rahim & Hamdan, 2022). Parents of autistic children may therefore judge Muslim schools not only by academic quality but also by whether Islamic values are translated into daily practice through emotional care, fair treatment, and respectful communication. Religious identity alone is not enough. It must be visible in how vulnerable learners are supported.

School leadership is central to this issue. Leaders shape institutional culture, teacher motivation, resource allocation, parent communication, and the seriousness with which inclusion is implemented (Bush & Glover, 2014; Bass & Riggio, 2006). In autism inclusive settings, leadership must move beyond administration. It must provide direction, reduce teacher uncertainty, create support systems, and ensure that inclusion is not left to individual teacher effort. Previous Malaysian studies suggest that schools still face challenges related to teacher preparedness, behavioural management, classroom adaptation, and limited institutional support for autistic learners (Lee et al., 2022; Yusof et al., 2021).

Parental trust is also critical. Parents of autistic children often evaluate schools through emotional safety, transparency, teacher sensitivity, and long-term child development rather than academic achievement alone. When schools communicate honestly and respond with care, parents are more likely to trust the institution. When communication is poor or support is inconsistent, parents may lose confidence. This matters because school reputation is increasingly shaped through parent networks, social media discussions, and lived experience rather than formal promotional materials alone (Ivy, 2008; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

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Despite growing attention to Islamic leadership, inclusive education, and educational marketing, these areas are still often examined separately. Studies on Islamic leadership tend to focus on values and governance. Studies on inclusive education often focus on teacher readiness and student support. Studies on educational marketing usually examine branding, satisfaction, and school choice. Less attention has been paid to how Muslim school leadership practices influence autism-inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes within a single integrated framework. This study addresses that gap using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design.

1.2 Problem Statement

Malaysia has shown commitment to inclusive education, yet the implementation of autism inclusion remains uneven across school settings. The challenge is more visible in Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions because these schools may differ in governance, resources, teacher training, and access to specialised support. While some schools show strong concern for autistic learners, others still rely on informal responses, personal teacher initiative, or case-by-case handling rather than structured inclusion systems (Lee et al., 2022; Yusof et al., 2021).

The first problem is leadership readiness. Many Muslim school leaders have administrative or religious leadership experience, but not all have sufficient preparation in autism support, inclusive education planning, or parent-school communication. Without clear leadership direction, inclusion may become reactive. Schools may act only after behavioural incidents, parent complaints, or teacher difficulties arise. This weakens consistency and places unnecessary pressure on teachers and families.

The second problem is teacher preparedness. Teachers are the main actors in classroom inclusion, but many face difficulty adapting lessons, managing behaviour, supporting sensory needs, and communicating progress to parents (Lee et al., 2022). Positive attitudes are useful, but they cannot replace training, procedures, and institutional support. When teachers are unsupported, autistic children may experience inconsistent routines, misunderstanding, social exclusion, or inappropriate disciplinary responses.

The third problem concerns parental trust. Parents of autistic children often carry anxiety about whether their children will be understood, protected, and treated with dignity. In Muslim schools, this concern is sharpened by the expectation that Islamic values should guide institutional behaviour. If schools communicate transparently and practise compassion, trust may increase. If schools fail to provide clear information or respond defensively, trust may decline (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

The fourth problem concerns educational marketing outcomes. School reputation is no longer produced only through brochures, advertisements, or official claims. Parents increasingly rely on lived experience, online communities, and recommendations from other parents (Ivy, 2008; Aziz et al., 2023). For parents of autistic children, a school's reputation depends on whether it can provide emotional safety, inclusive support, and honest communication. Autism inclusion therefore affects not only educational quality, but also institutional credibility.

The main gap is that existing studies have not sufficiently integrated Muslim school leadership, autism inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes within one empirical model. This study therefore asks: How do Muslim school leadership practices influence autism inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes in Malaysian Muslim schools?

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1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine the influence of Muslim school leadership practices on autism inclusive education.
2. Examine the influence of Muslim school leadership practices on leadership communication.
3. Determine the influence of autism inclusive education on parental trust.
4. Determine the influence of leadership communication on parental trust.
5. Examine the influence of parental trust on educational marketing outcomes.
6. Examine the influence of autism inclusive education on educational marketing outcomes.
7. Explore how school leaders, teachers, and parents interpret autism inclusion, leadership communication, parental trust, and school reputation within Muslim educational institutions.

These objectives align with the six hypotheses in the manuscript, which test the relationships among Muslim school leadership practices, autism-inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes.

1.4 Research Question

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Muslim school leadership practices influence autism inclusive education?
2. How do Muslim school leadership practices influence leadership communication?
3. How does autism inclusive education influence parental trust?
4. How does leadership communication influence parental trust?
5. How does parental trust influence educational marketing outcomes?
6. How does autism inclusive education influence educational marketing outcomes?
7. How do school leaders, teachers, and parents experience autism inclusion within Muslim educational institutions?

1.5 Significance of Study

This study contributes to inclusive Islamic education by linking leadership, autism inclusion, communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes in one framework. Theoretically, it extends Transformational Leadership Theory by examining leadership in a Muslim school context where ethical responsibility is central (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Beekun & Badawi, 2018). It also applies Inclusive Education Theory to show that autism inclusion requires institutional adaptation, not only student placement (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The study also contributes to Relationship Marketing Theory by showing how parental trust and school reputation are shaped by lived educational experience (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In Muslim schools, trust is not formed only through academic performance or religious identity. It is formed through transparent communication, consistent support, and the treatment of autistic children with dignity.

Practically, the study may help Muslim school leaders strengthen autism inclusion through teacher development, clearer communication procedures, and stronger parent engagement. For policymakers, the study highlights the need to support Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions with training, inclusion guidelines, and resources suited to autistic learners.

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1.6 Scope of Study

This study focuses on Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia that have experience with autism inclusive education. The respondents consist of school leaders, teachers, and parents. The study examines five constructs: Muslim school leadership practices, autism inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes.

The study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-method design. The quantitative phase tests the hypothesised relationships among the constructs, while the qualitative phase explains the statistical findings through participant experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). This design is appropriate because autism inclusion involves both measurable institutional relationships and human experiences that require deeper interpretation

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Autism inclusive education in Muslim schools cannot be examined only as a special education matter. It is shaped by leadership behaviour, teacher readiness, communication quality, parental trust, Islamic ethical responsibility, and school reputation. This chapter therefore reviews the literature on Autism Spectrum Disorder, inclusive education, Muslim school leadership, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes. It also develops the study's theoretical foundation and hypotheses.

2.1 Autism Spectrum Disorder and Inclusive Education

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with differences in social interaction, communication, emotional regulation, sensory response, and behavioural patterns (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Autistic learners have different learning needs. Some may participate in mainstream classrooms with limited support, while others require structured routines, behavioural guidance, sensory adjustment, communication support, and individualised teaching strategies.

Inclusive education, however, must not be reduced to physical placement in a classroom. Ainscow (2020) argues that meaningful inclusion requires participation, belonging, and institutional flexibility. UNESCO (2020) also frames inclusion as a response to exclusion based on learner difference, ability, and background. This means that a school cannot claim to be inclusive merely because it enrolls autistic students. Inclusion becomes meaningful only when the school adapts its teaching, communication, routines, and emotional support to the learner's needs.

In Malaysia, the challenge is not only awareness but implementation. Studies have reported that many schools continue to face difficulties involving teacher preparedness, classroom adaptation, behavioural management, and institutional support for inclusive education (Lee et al., 2022; Yusof et al., 2021). This gap is especially relevant to Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions, where inclusive practice must also reflect Islamic values such as compassion, fairness, patience, and responsibility (Rahim & Hamdan, 2022).

Literature therefore suggests a clear tension. Inclusive education policy promotes access and participation, but school-level practice often depends on leadership commitment, teacher capacity, and institutional support. In Muslim schools, the issue becomes more demanding because inclusion is judged

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not only by technical support but also by moral consistency. If Islamic values are claimed but not translated into support for autistic learners, parents may question the school's credibility. Therefore, autism inclusive education in this study is treated as an institutional practice shaped by leadership, communication, and ethical responsibility.

2.2 Muslim School Leadership Practices

School leadership strongly influences institutional culture, teacher motivation, communication practices, and the way schools respond to students with diverse needs (Bush & Glover, 2014). Transformational Leadership Theory explains that leaders influence organisations through vision, motivation, individualised consideration, and communication (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These leadership behaviours are relevant in autism inclusive education because teachers often require emotional support, guidance, and practical direction when managing autistic learners.

In Muslim educational institutions, leadership also carries an ethical meaning. Leaders are expected to practise amanah, adil, ihsan, shura, compassion, and moral accountability (Beekun & Badawi, 2018; Rahim & Hamdan, 2022). These values are particularly important when schools support autistic children, who may be vulnerable to misunderstanding or exclusion. Islamic leadership therefore cannot remain abstract. It must be evident in teacher development, parent communication, classroom support, and the fair treatment of learners.

Previous studies suggest that inclusive leadership can improve teacher confidence, parental satisfaction, and student support (Khalifa et al., 2022). However, Malaysian studies also show that school leaders and teachers may still lack specialised preparation for autism management and inclusive educational practice (Lee et al., 2022; Yusof et al., 2021). This shows that positive attitudes toward inclusion are insufficient unless they are supported by structured leadership action.

The critical issue is the gap between ethical aspiration and operational readiness. Muslim school leaders may value compassion and justice, but these values must be institutionalised through policy, training, communication, and classroom procedures. Without this, autism inclusion may rely too heavily on individual teachers' efforts. For this reason, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Muslim school leadership practices positively influence autism inclusive education.

2.3 Muslim School Leadership Practices and Leadership Communication

Leadership communication is one of the main ways through which leadership becomes visible to parents and teachers. In autism inclusive settings, communication includes explaining school expectations, updating parents about child development, guiding teachers, responding to behavioural incidents, and consulting families before major decisions are made.

From a transformational leadership perspective, communication helps leaders develop shared understanding, reduce uncertainty, and motivate institutional members (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Within Muslim schools, communication also reflects Islamic ethical values. Amanah requires honesty. Shura requires consultation. Ihsan requires sensitivity and care. Therefore, communication is not only an administrative act but also an ethical expression of school leadership.

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For parents of autistic children, communication carries emotional weight. Parents often depend on school leaders and teachers for information about behavioural changes, classroom progress, emotional safety, and peer interaction. When communication is transparent and respectful, parents may feel that the school understands their child. When communication is defensive, delayed, or unclear, parents may interpret the school as lacking empathy or competence.

This synthesis suggests that Muslim school leadership practices should strengthen leadership communication. Effective leaders do not only make decisions; they create reliable communication channels that support trust and inclusion. Therefore, the study proposes:

H2: Muslim school leadership practices positively influence leadership communication.

2.4 Autism Inclusive Education and Parental Trust

Parental trust refers to parents' confidence that a school will act responsibly, competently, and sincerely in supporting their child. For parents of autistic children, trust is built through repeated experience. It depends on whether teachers understand autism-related needs, whether the school protects emotional safety, whether routines are consistent, and whether the child is treated with dignity.

Inclusive Education Theory provides the basis for this relationship. If inclusion requires participation, belonging, and institutional adaptation, then parental trust increases when parents observe these principles in practice (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). A school that admits autistic children but fails to provide structured support may weaken trust. By contrast, a school that adapts classroom routines, supports teachers, and communicates clearly may strengthen parental confidence.

The literature therefore suggests that autism inclusive education is a direct source of parental trust. Inclusion becomes credible when parents see that the school's support is consistent, respectful, and morally grounded. Thus, the study proposes:

H3: Autism inclusive education positively influences parental trust.

2.5 Leadership Communication and Parental Trust

Relationship Marketing Theory argues that trust develops through reliable, transparent, and consistent communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Although this theory was developed in marketing, it is relevant to education because schools maintain long-term relationships with parents. In the case of autistic children, the relationship is more sensitive because parents often depend on the school for information they cannot directly observe.

Leadership communication reduces uncertainty. Parents cannot see everything that happens in the classroom, but they can judge whether the school communicates honestly and respectfully. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) argue that educational trust depends on relational interaction rather than formal promises alone. This means that trust is built through how schools communicate, not only through what schools claim.

In Muslim educational institutions, communication also has ethical meaning. Honest updates reflect amanah. Respectful consultation reflects shura. Compassionate explanation reflects ihsan. When school

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leaders communicate with these values, parents may perceive the school as morally reliable. When communication is weak, the gap between religious identity and institutional practice becomes visible.

The literature therefore supports a direct relationship between leadership communication and parental trust. Communication is not merely a supporting function; it is one of the main mechanisms through which trust is formed. Therefore, the study proposes:

H4: Leadership communication positively influences parental trust.

2.6 Parental Trust and Educational Marketing Outcomes

Educational marketing outcomes refer to school reputation, positive parent recommendation, institutional image, and the likelihood that parents will speak favourably about the school. Earlier educational marketing studies often focused on branding, promotion, and satisfaction (Ivy, 2008). However, for parents of autistic children, marketing outcomes are shaped less by formal promotion and more by lived experience.

Relationship Marketing Theory explains that trust encourages commitment, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This is highly relevant to Muslim schools because parents often share school experiences through community networks, parent groups, and social media.

For parents of autistic children, trust is especially powerful because school choice involves risk. Parents are not only choosing academic instruction; they are choosing an environment that will affect their child's emotional safety and dignity. When trust is strong, parents are more likely to recommend the school. When trust is weak, negative experiences may spread quickly and damage institutional credibility.

This means that educational marketing in autism inclusive Muslim schools cannot be separated from trust. Reputation is earned through consistent care, not merely promoted through institutional messages. Therefore, the study proposes:

H5: Parental trust positively influences educational marketing outcomes.

2.7 Autism Inclusive Education and Educational Marketing Outcomes

Autism inclusive education may also influence educational marketing outcomes directly. A school that provides meaningful support for autistic learners may develop a reputation for compassion, professionalism, and ethical responsibility. This is especially important for Muslim schools because inclusion may be interpreted as evidence that Islamic values are practised, not only taught.

However, this relationship must be interpreted carefully. Autism inclusion should not be treated as a marketing tool. Its primary purpose is educational justice and the dignity of autistic learners. Nevertheless, when inclusive practices are experienced positively by parents, they may contribute to reputation, recommendation, and institutional legitimacy.

Thus, the study proposes:

H6: Autism inclusive education positively influences educational marketing outcomes.

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2.8 Theoretical Foundations

This study integrates three theories: Transformational Leadership Theory, Inclusive Education Theory, and Relationship Marketing Theory. These theories are used together because the study examines a chain of relationships from leadership to inclusion, communication, trust, and institutional reputation.

Transformational Leadership Theory explains how school leaders influence institutional behaviour through vision, motivation, support, and communication (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In this study, the theory supports the relationship between Muslim school leadership practices, autism inclusive education, and leadership communication. However, the theory is interpreted within a Muslim school context, where leadership also carries ethical and religious responsibility.

Inclusive Education Theory explains why schools must adapt to learner diversity rather than expecting learners to fit rigid institutional routines (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In this study, the theory supports the relationship between autism inclusive education and parental trust, as well as the link between autism inclusive education and educational marketing outcomes.

Relationship Marketing Theory explains how trust and communication shape long-term stakeholder relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In this study, the theory supports the relationships between leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes. This is suitable because parents of autistic children often evaluate schools through relational experience, not only formal information.

Together, these theories provide a coherent explanation. Muslim school leadership creates the conditions for inclusion and communication. Inclusion and communication build parental trust. Trust and inclusive experience then influence educational marketing outcomes.

2.9 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The conceptual framework positions Muslim school leadership practices as the main antecedent of autism inclusive education and leadership communication. Autism inclusive education and leadership communication are expected to influence parental trust. Parental trust is expected to influence educational marketing outcomes, while autism inclusive education is also expected to have a direct influence on educational marketing outcomes.

This structure is consistent with the Chapter 1, which argues that autism inclusion in Muslim schools is simultaneously an educational, ethical, relational, and reputational issue.

Based on the literature, the hypotheses are:

H1: Muslim school leadership practices positively influence autism inclusive education.

H2: Muslim school leadership practices positively influence leadership communication.

H3: Autism inclusive education positively influences parental trust.

H4: Leadership communication positively influences parental trust.

H5: Parental trust positively influences educational marketing outcomes.

H6: Autism inclusive education positively influences educational marketing outcomes.

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3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodological procedures used to examine the relationships among Muslim school leadership practices, autism-inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes in Malaysian Muslim schools. The chapter covers the research design, population, sampling procedure, research instrument, data collection process, data analysis technique, mixed-method integration, validity, reliability, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-method design. The quantitative phase was conducted first to test the hypothesised relationships among the main constructs. The qualitative phase was conducted after the quantitative analysis to explain, clarify, and deepen the statistical findings. This design was appropriate because the study required both numerical evidence and participant interpretation.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2023) explain that explanatory sequential mixed-methods design is useful when researchers first need to identify statistical patterns and then explore the meaning behind those patterns through qualitative inquiry. In this study, PLS-SEM was used to examine the relationships among Muslim school leadership practices, autism-inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes. The interview data were then used to explain why these relationships occurred within the lived context of Muslim schools.

The quantitative phase employed a cross-sectional survey design because the study examined respondents' perceptions at a single point in time. A cross-sectional design was appropriate because the study focused on current leadership practices, experiences of inclusion, communication patterns, and parental trust. The qualitative phase used semi-structured interviews because the study also required deeper explanations of how school leaders, teachers, and parents experienced autism inclusion, communication, and institutional trust.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of school leaders, teachers, and parents from Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia that had experience with autistic students. These three groups were selected because they represent different but connected perspectives on autism inclusion.

School leaders were included because they influence institutional policy, teacher support, communication systems, and inclusive school culture. Teachers were included because they implement inclusion directly in classroom settings. Parents were included because they evaluate the school through their child's experience, emotional safety, communication quality, and trust. The inclusion of these three groups allowed the study to examine autism inclusion as an institutional, classroom, and family experience.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The study used purposive sampling for the quantitative phase because respondents needed to meet specific criteria. Participants were selected based on their direct knowledge or experience of autism inclusive education within Muslim school settings. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

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1. The respondent was a school leader, teacher, or parent connected to a Muslim private school or Islamic educational institution in Malaysia.
2. The respondent had direct or indirect experience with autistic students or autism inclusive education.
3. The respondent was able to provide informed views on leadership practices, communication, parental trust, or school reputation.
4. The respondent voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study did not aim to sample the general population. It required participants who had relevant experience with autism inclusion in Muslim educational institutions. This approach is consistent with mixed-method research where information-rich participants are needed to address a specific research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023).

Snowball sampling was also used because access to Muslim schools with autism inclusive experience and parents of autistic children can be limited. Some schools may be cautious about discussing special needs provision, and some parents may prefer to participate only through trusted referrals. Snowball sampling helped identify additional respondents through school networks, teacher contacts, parent communities, and autism-related support networks. Rana et al. (2025) noted that snowball sampling can be appropriate when researchers study specialised groups where access depends on trust and referral.

The quantitative phase included 300 respondents, comprising school leaders, teachers, and parents. The qualitative phase involved 18 participants selected from survey respondents who indicated willingness to be interviewed and who could provide deeper insights into the study objectives.

3.4 Sampling Bias and Limitations

The use of purposive and snowball sampling may create sampling bias because respondents were not selected randomly. Participants who were more interested in autism inclusion, more active in parent networks, or more connected to school leadership may have been more likely to participate. As a result, the findings may reflect the views of respondents with greater awareness of or experience with autism-inclusive education.

Another limitation is that the study focused on Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions. The findings may not be fully generalisable to government schools, international schools, or non-Muslim educational institutions. However, the purpose of the study was not to generalise to all schools in Malaysia. The purpose was to examine a specific educational context where Islamic leadership values, autism inclusion, parental trust, and school reputation intersect.

To reduce bias, the study included three respondent groups: school leaders, teachers, and parents. This allowed the study to compare institutional, classroom, and family perspectives. The qualitative phase also helped identify areas where respondents shared similar experiences and where their interpretations differed.

3.5 Research Instrument

The quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire divided into six sections. Section A measured demographic information. Section B measured Muslim school leadership practices. Section C measured

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autism inclusive education. Section D measured leadership communication. Section E measured parental trust. Section F measured educational marketing outcomes.

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. The Likert scale was appropriate because the study examined perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to leadership, inclusion, communication, trust, and reputation.

The measurement items were adapted from established literature. Items on leadership practices were informed by Transformational Leadership Theory and previous leadership studies (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bush & Glover, 2014). Items on autism inclusive education were adapted from inclusive education literature, particularly studies on institutional adaptation, teacher readiness, and learner participation (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Lee et al., 2022). Items on leadership communication and parental trust were guided by Relationship Marketing Theory and educational trust literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Items on educational marketing outcomes were informed by educational marketing and institutional reputation studies (Ivy, 2008; Aziz et al., 2023).

The qualitative instrument consisted of semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions explored participant experiences regarding autism inclusion, leadership behaviour, communication practices, teacher readiness, parental confidence, and school reputation. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate because they allowed participants to provide personal explanations while still ensuring that the discussion remained aligned with the research objectives (Byrne, 2022).

3.6 Instrument Validation

Instrument validation was conducted before full data collection. First, the questionnaire items were reviewed to ensure content validity. The items were checked for conceptual relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study constructs. This process ensured that each item measured the intended construct and aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

Second, the instrument was reviewed by individuals with knowledge of education, leadership, special needs education, and research methodology. Feedback was used to refine wording, remove unclear items, and improve the questionnaire's suitability for school leaders, teachers, and parents.

Third, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of respondents who shared similar characteristics with the target population. The pilot test helped assess whether the questionnaire items were understandable, whether the scale was appropriate, and whether respondents could complete the survey without confusion. Minor wording adjustments were made before the final survey was distributed.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Values above 0.70 were considered acceptable for internal consistency, following the recommendation of Hair et al. (2022). In the final data analysis, all constructs achieved Cronbach’s alpha values above the recommended threshold, indicating acceptable reliability. The manuscript’s results section reports Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from 0.81 to 0.89 across the five constructs.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the quantitative survey. Before distributing the questionnaire, permission was obtained from participating schools and relevant institutional

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contacts. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw.

The questionnaire was distributed online through school communication channels, teacher contacts, parent networks, and educational contacts. Online distribution was suitable because respondents were located across Malaysia and because some parents and educators were easier to reach through digital networks.

After the quantitative data were analysed, the second phase involved qualitative interviews. Interview participants were selected from respondents who had completed the survey and indicated willingness to participate further. Selection considered the respondent category, the relevance of experience, and the ability to explain issues related to leadership, communication, autism inclusion, parental trust, and school reputation.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All participants were informed about confidentiality and voluntary participation before the interview.

3.8 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and SmartPLS. SPSS was used for data screening, descriptive statistics, and preliminary reliability analysis. Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine respondent profiles and construct means. SmartPLS was used to conduct Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling because the study involved several latent constructs and prediction-oriented relationships.

PLS-SEM was appropriate for this study because the conceptual model examined multiple relationships among leadership, inclusion, communication, trust, and marketing outcomes. Hair et al. (2022) explain that PLS-SEM is suitable for studies involving latent constructs, complex models, and prediction-oriented analysis.

The PLS-SEM analysis followed two stages: measurement model assessment and structural model assessment.

3.9 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed to determine whether the constructs were measured reliably and validly. The assessment involved indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Indicator reliability was assessed through outer loadings. Items with acceptable factor loadings were retained because they showed sufficient association with their intended constructs. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Values above 0.70 were considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2022).

Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted. AVE values of 0.50 or above indicated that the construct explained an acceptable amount of variance in its indicators. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio. These

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procedures ensured that each construct was conceptually and empirically distinct from other constructs in the model.

This stage was important because the study examined closely related constructs, particularly leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes. Without proper discriminant validity assessment, the model could suffer from construct overlap

3.10 Structural Model Assessment

After the measurement model was confirmed, the structural model was assessed to test the hypotheses. The structural model assessment involved collinearity assessment, path coefficient estimation, bootstrapping, coefficient of determination, effect size, and predictive relevance.

Collinearity was assessed using the variance inflation factor. This procedure ensured that the predictor constructs were not excessively correlated. Path coefficients were examined to determine the strength and direction of the hypothesised relationships. Bootstrapping was used to assess the statistical significance of the path coefficients through t-values and p-values.

The coefficient of determination was used to assess the explanatory power of the model. Effect size was used to determine the relative contribution of each predictor construct. Predictive relevance was assessed to evaluate whether the model had predictive capability. These criteria provided a more complete evaluation of the structural model rather than relying only on significance values.

The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Muslim school leadership practices positively influence autism inclusive education.

H2: Muslim school leadership practices positively influence leadership communication.

H3: Autism inclusive education positively influences parental trust.

H4: Leadership communication positively influences parental trust.

H5: Parental trust positively influences educational marketing outcomes.

H6: Autism inclusive education positively influences educational marketing outcomes

3.11 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was suitable because the study aimed to identify recurring patterns in participants' experiences of autism inclusion, leadership communication, teacher readiness, parental trust, and school reputation.

The analysis followed the procedures suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022). First, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes were generated from meaningful statements. Third, related codes were grouped into potential themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed to ensure that they represented the data accurately. Fifth, the themes were defined and named. Finally, the themes were used to explain and enrich the quantitative findings.

The qualitative analysis focused on issues that emerged from the quantitative results. For example, if leadership communication showed a strong relationship with parental trust, the interview data were

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examined to understand how communication was experienced by parents, teachers, and school leaders. This procedure strengthened the mixed-method logic of the study.

3.12 Mixed-Method Integration

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretation stage. The quantitative phase identified the strength and significance of relationships among the constructs. The qualitative phase then explained how and why these relationships occurred in practice.

This approach was consistent with explanatory sequential mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). The survey results provided statistical evidence, while the interviews provided contextual meaning. For example, quantitative findings could show that Muslim school leadership practices significantly influenced leadership communication. Qualitative interviews then explained this relationship through participant accounts of compassion, transparency, consultation, and school responsiveness.

Integration was conducted through a connecting and explaining strategy. The phases were connected because interview participants were selected after the survey phase. The phases were explanatory because qualitative themes were used to interpret the quantitative findings. This helped the study avoid treating the quantitative and qualitative findings as separate sections with no analytical relationship.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

The study involved human participants, including parents of autistic children and educators discussing sensitive school experiences. Ethical care was therefore essential. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Informed consent was obtained before participation. No participant was forced to answer questions they found uncomfortable. The names of respondents, schools, and institutions were anonymised to protect privacy. Interview data were stored securely and used only for academic purposes.

The study also treated autism-related experiences with sensitivity. Parents and teachers were allowed to describe their experiences in their own terms, and care was taken not to identify any child, school, or family through the reporting of findings. The manuscript already includes an ethical statement confirming voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and secure data handling.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. The quantitative phase examined the relationships among Muslim school leadership practices, autism-inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes. The qualitative phase then explained the statistical findings through the experiences of school leaders, teachers, and parents.

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4.1 Respondent Profile

A total of 300 respondents participated in the quantitative survey. The respondents consisted of school leaders, teachers, and parents from Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia. The qualitative phase involved 18 participants selected from survey respondents who had direct experience with autism inclusion and were willing to be interviewed.

Table 4.1: Respondent Profile

Respondent Category	Frequency	Percentage
School leaders	52	17.3%
Teachers	156	52.0%
Parents	92	30.7%
Total	300	100.0%

Teachers formed the largest group of respondents because they are directly involved in classroom implementation of autism inclusion. Parents represented almost one-third of the sample, which allowed the study to capture parental trust and lived experience. School leaders were also included because they shape institutional culture, communication systems, and inclusive support structures.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the general level of respondent perceptions for each construct. The results show that Muslim school leadership practices recorded the highest mean score, followed by leadership communication and parental trust. Autism-inclusive education and educational marketing outcomes recorded moderate-to-high mean scores.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Muslim School Leadership Practices	4.18	0.64	High
Autism Inclusive Education	3.81	0.77	Moderate High
Leadership Communication	4.06	0.68	High
Parental Trust	4.02	0.71	High
Educational Marketing Outcomes	3.89	0.74	Moderate High

The results suggest that respondents generally viewed Muslim school leadership positively, particularly regarding compassion, communication, and institutional concern. However, autism-inclusive education had a lower mean than leadership and communication. This indicates that although schools may show positive leadership values, practical inclusion still faces difficulties involving teacher preparedness, classroom adaptation, and specialised autism support.

4.3 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed before examining the structural relationships. This step was necessary to ensure that the constructs were measured reliably and validly. The assessment included internal

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consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, following the PLS-SEM procedures recommended by Hair et al. (2022).

4.4 Reliability and Convergent Validity

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values above 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency, while AVE values above 0.50 indicate acceptable convergent validity.

Table 4.3: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Result
Muslim School Leadership Practices	0.89	0.92	0.68	Accepted
Autism Inclusive Education	0.84	0.88	0.60	Accepted
Leadership Communication	0.88	0.91	0.66	Accepted
Parental Trust	0.86	0.90	0.64	Accepted
Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.81	0.86	0.57	Accepted

All constructs achieved Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70. The alpha values ranging from 0.81 to 0.89, indicating acceptable internal consistency.The AVE values ranged from 0.57 to 0.68, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50. This indicates that the items explained sufficient variance in their respective constructs. The results support the adequacy of the measurement model.

4.5 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The square root of AVE for each construct should be higher than its correlations with other constructs.

Table 4.4: Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	MSLP	AIE	LC	PT	EMO
Muslim School Leadership Practices	0.825				
Autism Inclusive Education	0.58	0.775			
Leadership Communication	0.69	0.54	0.812		
Parental Trust	0.50	0.61	0.58	0.800	
Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.46	0.56	0.52	0.62	0.755

Note. MSLP = Muslim School Leadership Practices; AIE = Autism Inclusive Education; LC = Leadership Communication; PT = Parental Trust; EMO = Educational Marketing Outcomes.

The diagonal values are higher than the off-diagonal correlations in their respective rows and columns. This indicates acceptable discriminant validity. The constructs are related, but they are not statistically redundant. This is important because leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes are conceptually close but must remain empirically distinct.

HTMT Assessment

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The heterotrait-monotrait ratio was also assessed to further confirm discriminant validity. HTMT values below 0.85 indicate acceptable discriminant validity.

Table 4.5: HTMT Results

Construct Relationship	HTMT
MSLP – AIE	0.67
MSLP – LC	0.76
MSLP – PT	0.59
MSLP – EMO	0.55
AIE – LC	0.64
AIE – PT	0.72
AIE – EMO	0.68
LC – PT	0.69
LC – EMO	0.63
PT – EMO	0.74

All HTMT values were below 0.85. This confirms that the constructs had acceptable discriminant validity. The measurement model was therefore suitable for structural model assessment.

4.6 Structural Model Assessment

After confirming the measurement model, the structural model was assessed. The assessment included collinearity, path coefficients, significance testing, coefficient of determination, effect size, and predictive relevance.

4.7 Collinearity Assessment

Collinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor values. VIF values below 5.00 indicate that collinearity is not a serious concern.

All VIF values were below the recommended threshold. This indicates that the structural paths were not affected by serious multicollinearity.

4.8 Hypothesis Testing

Bootstrapping was conducted to test the significance of the hypothesised relationships. The results show that all six hypotheses were supported. The strongest relationship was between Muslim school leadership practices and leadership communication, followed by Muslim school leadership practices and autism inclusive education, and parental trust and educational marketing outcomes.

Table 4.6: Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Muslim School Leadership Practices → Autism Inclusive Education	0.58	11.84	0.000	Supported
H2	Muslim School Leadership Practices → Leadership Communication	0.69	15.72	0.000	Supported
H3	Autism Inclusive Education → Parental Trust	0.41	7.96	0.000	Supported
H4	Leadership Communication → Parental Trust	0.36	6.88	0.000	Supported

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Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	t-value	p-value	Result
H5	Parental Trust → Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.52	10.47	0.000	Supported
H6	Autism Inclusive Education → Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.24	3.41	0.001	Supported

The findings show that Muslim school leadership practices had a strong positive influence on leadership communication. This suggests that effective leadership improves the quality of communication between schools, teachers, and parents. In Muslim school settings, communication appears to be one of the clearest ways through which leadership values become visible.

Muslim school leadership practices also had a strong positive influence on autism inclusive education. This means that leadership support, compassion, teacher guidance, and institutional direction are important for improving autism inclusion. Leadership is therefore not a background factor. It directly shapes whether inclusion becomes structured and meaningful.

Autism inclusive education and leadership communication both influenced parental trust. The path from autism inclusive education to parental trust was slightly stronger than the path from leadership communication to parental trust. This suggests that parents build trust through both actual support for autistic children and transparent communication. Communication matters, but it must be accompanied by visible inclusion practices.

Parental trust had a strong positive influence on educational marketing outcomes. This finding suggests that parent recommendation, institutional reputation, and positive school image are strongly shaped by trust. Autism inclusive education also had a direct positive effect on educational marketing outcomes, although the effect was weaker. This indicates that inclusion may improve school reputation directly, but parental trust remains the stronger pathway.

4.9 Coefficient of Determination

The coefficient of determination was used to examine the explanatory power of the model.

Table 4.7: Coefficient of Determination

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Interpretation
Autism Inclusive Education	0.34	Moderate
Leadership Communication	0.48	Moderate
Parental Trust	0.46	Moderate
Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.49	Moderate

The model explained 34% of the variance in autism inclusive education and 48% of the variance in leadership communication. It also explained 46% of the variance in parental trust and 49% of the variance in educational marketing outcomes. These values suggest that the model has reasonable explanatory power, especially for leadership communication and educational marketing outcomes.

4.10 Effect Size

Effect size was assessed using f^2. Values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 generally indicate small, medium, and large effects.

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Table 4.8: Effect Size

Relationship	f^2	Interpretation
Muslim School Leadership Practices → Autism Inclusive Education	0.52	Large
Muslim School Leadership Practices → Leadership Communication	0.92	Large
Autism Inclusive Education → Parental Trust	0.25	Medium
Leadership Communication → Parental Trust	0.20	Medium
Parental Trust → Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.38	Large
Autism Inclusive Education → Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.08	Small

The effect size results confirm that Muslim school leadership practices were especially important for leadership communication and autism inclusive education. Parental trust also had a large effect on educational marketing outcomes. Autism inclusive education had a smaller direct effect on educational marketing outcomes, suggesting that its reputation effect may occur more strongly through parental trust.

4.11 Predictive Relevance

Predictive relevance was assessed using Q^2 values. A Q^2 value above zero indicates that the model has predictive relevance.

Table 4.9: Predictive Relevance

Endogenous Construct	Q^2	Result
Autism Inclusive Education	0.21	Predictive relevance established
Leadership Communication	0.32	Predictive relevance established
Parental Trust	0.29	Predictive relevance established
Educational Marketing Outcomes	0.31	Predictive relevance established

All Q^2 values were above zero. This indicates that the model has predictive relevance for the endogenous constructs.

4.12 Summary of Quantitative Findings

Table 4.10: Summary of Quantitative Findings

Main Finding	Interpretation
Leadership strongly influenced communication	Muslim school leaders shape communication quality with teachers and parents.
Leadership strongly influenced autism inclusion	Inclusion depends on institutional direction, not only teacher goodwill.
Autism inclusion influenced parental trust	Parents trust schools when children receive visible, consistent support.
Communication influenced parental trust	Transparent and respectful communication reduces parental uncertainty.
Parental trust influenced marketing outcomes	Reputation is shaped by trust and parent recommendation.
Autism inclusion also influenced marketing outcomes	Inclusive practice contributes to institutional credibility.

The quantitative findings show that autism inclusion in Muslim schools is not a narrow special education matter. It is connected to leadership systems, communication practices, parental confidence, and school reputation.

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4.13 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative phase involved 18 participants selected from the survey respondents. The participants included school leaders, teachers, and parents who had direct experience with autism inclusion in Muslim educational institutions. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The research identified five qualitative themes: compassionate leadership, communication transparency,limited teacher preparation, autism as moral responsibility, and parent experience shaping reputation.

Table 4.12: Qualitative Themes

Theme	Description	Link to Quantitative Finding
Compassionate leadership	Leaders who showed patience, empathy, and concern strengthened confidence among teachers and parents.	Explains H1 and H2
Communication transparency	Parents valued honest updates about child progress, incidents, and support strategies.	Explains H4
Limited teacher readiness	Teachers reported difficulty managing behaviour, sensory needs, and classroom adaptation.	Explains why autism inclusion scored lower than leadership
Autism inclusion as Islamic ethical responsibility	Participants linked inclusion with amanah, ihsan, fairness, and moral duty.	Explains the Muslim school leadership context
Parent experience shapes reputation	Parents relied on lived experience and recommendations from other parents when evaluating schools.	Explains H5 and H6

Theme 1: Compassionate Leadership

Participants frequently described effective Muslim school leaders as patient, approachable, and emotionally supportive. Parents trusted leaders who treated autistic children with dignity and listened carefully to concerns. Teachers also valued leaders who gave practical support rather than blame when classroom difficulties occurred.

This theme explains why Muslim school leadership practices had a strong effect on autism inclusive education and leadership communication. Leadership was not experienced only as policy or instruction. It was experienced through daily behaviour, emotional availability, and willingness to support both teachers and parents.

Theme 2: Communication Transparency

Parents repeatedly emphasised the importance of honest communication. They wanted regular updates about their child's progress, emotional condition, behavioural incidents, and classroom participation. Parents did not expect schools to be perfect, but they expected schools to be honest. This theme explains the significant relationship between leadership communication and parental trust. Transparent communication reduced uncertainty and helped parents feel included in educational decisions. Poor communication, by contrast, created suspicion and anxiety.

Theme 3: Limited Teacher Readiness

Teachers acknowledged that they often lacked specialised training in autism support. They described challenges related to behavioural management, sensory sensitivity, peer interaction, classroom routine, and

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lesson adaptation. Some teachers expressed willingness to support autistic students but felt that goodwill alone was insufficient.

This theme helps explain why autism inclusive education recorded a lower mean score than leadership communication and parental trust. Although schools may have positive values, implementation still depends on training, resources, and institutional systems.

Theme 4: Autism Inclusion as Islamic Ethical Responsibility

Several participants interpreted autism inclusion through Islamic values. They described support for autistic children as part of amanah, ihsan, compassion, fairness, and responsibility toward vulnerable learners. This theme shows that Muslim school leadership is not only administrative. It carries moral expectations.

This theme strengthens the theoretical argument that Transformational Leadership Theory should be read alongside Islamic ethical leadership in this study. Parents did not evaluate Muslim schools only by performance. They also evaluated whether Islamic values were translated into practice.

Theme 5: Parent Experience Shapes Reputation

Parents stated that school reputation was strongly shaped by lived experience and word-of-mouth. Many parents relied on recommendations from other parents, autism support groups, and online communities before choosing or recommending a school. This supports the quantitative finding that parental trust strongly influenced educational marketing outcomes.

4.14 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The mixed-method integration shows that the qualitative findings explain the statistical relationships found in the quantitative phase. The research shows that quantitative findings showed strong statistical relationships, while qualitative findings explained how emotional support, communication transparency, and Islamic ethical values shaped participant experiences.

Table 4.13: Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative Result	Qualitative Explanation	Integrated Interpretation
H1: Leadership → Autism Inclusion, β = 0.58	Participants described leaders as important in setting expectations, supporting teachers, and treating autistic children with dignity.	Autism inclusion improves when leadership becomes practical, compassionate, and institutionally organised.
H2: Leadership → Communication, β = 0.69	Parents and teachers valued leaders who communicated clearly and responded quickly.	Communication is the strongest visible expression of leadership practice.
H3: Autism Inclusion → Parental Trust, β = 0.41	Parents trusted schools that provided consistent routines, emotional safety, and classroom support.	Trust is built when inclusion is experienced directly by the child and observed by parents.
H4: Communication → Parental Trust, β = 0.36	Honest updates reduced parental anxiety and helped families feel respected.	Communication strengthens trust when it is transparent, timely, and empathetic.
H5: Parental Trust → Marketing Outcomes, β = 0.52	Parents shared positive experiences through community networks and recommendations.	Reputation is earned through trust and lived experience.
H6: Autism Inclusion → Marketing Outcomes, β = 0.24	Inclusive support contributed to positive school image, but mainly when parents trusted the school.	Inclusion contributes to reputation directly, but trust is the stronger reputational pathway.

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The integrated findings show that Muslim school leadership influences both the operational and relational dimensions of autism inclusion. Leadership creates the institutional conditions for communication and inclusive practice. These, in turn, shape parental trust. Parental trust then becomes the main pathway through which schools develop positive educational marketing outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the research objectives, hypotheses, theoretical framework, and qualitative themes. The study examined the relationships among Muslim school leadership practices, autism-inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes in Malaysian Muslim schools. The quantitative findings showed that all six hypotheses were supported, with the strongest relationship found between Muslim school leadership practices and leadership communication. The qualitative findings identified five themes: compassionate leadership, communication transparency, limited teacher readiness, autism inclusion as Islamic ethical responsibility, and parent experience shaping school reputation.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

Muslim School Leadership Practices and Autism Inclusive Education

The finding shows that Muslim school leadership practices positively influenced autism inclusive education. The relationship was strong, with a beta value of 0.58. This means that autism inclusion improves when school leaders provide direction, emotional support, guidance for teachers, and institutional commitment. Leadership is therefore not a peripheral factor. It is one of the main conditions that determines whether inclusion becomes systematic or remains dependent on individual teacher goodwill.

This finding supports Transformational Leadership Theory, which argues that leaders influence organisational behaviour through vision, motivation, individualised support, and shared purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In the context of autism inclusion, these leadership behaviours are practical rather than abstract. Teachers need guidance on classroom adaptation, behavioural responses, sensory sensitivity, and parent communication. Without leadership support, teachers may feel personally responsible for problems that should be addressed institutionally.

The finding also extends the discussion of Muslim school leadership. In Islamic educational institutions, leadership carries moral expectations. Values such as amanah, adil, ihsan, compassion, and responsibility must be translated into how autistic children are treated in classrooms and school routines (Beekun & Badawi, 2018; Rahim & Hamdan, 2022). The qualitative findings strengthen this interpretation because participants associated autism inclusion with dignity, patience, fairness, and religious responsibility. The earlier manuscript already showed that participants viewed autism support as more than administrative duty. It was understood as moral obligation.

This finding is important because it reveals a possible gap between Islamic identity and inclusive practice. A school may present itself as Muslim or Islamic, but parents judge that identity through daily treatment of vulnerable learners. If autistic children are supported with patience and structure, Islamic values become visible. If they are misunderstood, excluded, or managed inconsistently, the school's moral credibility is weakened.

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Muslim School Leadership Practices and Leadership Communication

The strongest relationship in the study was between Muslim school leadership practices and leadership communication, with a beta value of 0.69. This indicates that communication is the clearest expression of leadership in autism inclusive settings. Parents and teachers experience leadership not only through policy documents or school vision statements, but through how leaders explain decisions, respond to concerns, and communicate during difficult situations.

This finding is consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory because communication is a major mechanism through which leaders build shared understanding and reduce uncertainty (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, in Muslim schools, communication also has ethical meaning. Honest communication reflects amanah. Consultation reflects shura. Compassionate explanation reflects ihsan. Therefore, leadership communication is not simply an administrative process. It is part of the ethical practice of school leadership.

For parents of autistic children, communication has emotional significance. Parents often worry about whether their child is safe, understood, and supported. They may not observe classroom interactions directly, so they rely on school communication to assess the child's wellbeing. Transparent communication reduces anxiety. Defensive or delayed communication increases doubt. The qualitative findings support this point, as communication transparency was one of the main themes identified in the interviews.

This finding also explains why leadership communication must be treated as a separate construct in the model. Leadership may shape inclusion directly, but it also shapes trust through communication. A school may provide some support for autistic children, but if parents are not informed clearly, trust may remain weak. Communication makes institutional care visible.

Autism Inclusive Education and Parental Trust

The finding shows that autism inclusive education positively influenced parental trust, with a beta value of 0.41. This suggests that parents trust schools when they see practical evidence that their children are understood, protected, and treated with dignity. Trust is not built mainly through school claims. It is built through repeated experience.

This finding supports Inclusive Education Theory, which argues that inclusion requires participation, belonging, and institutional adaptation rather than mere physical placement (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). For parents, the meaning of inclusion is practical. They observe whether teachers adapt routines, whether the school responds to sensory or behavioural needs, whether the child is accepted by peers, and whether problems are handled with patience. These experiences determine whether parents trust the school.

The result also reflects the problem discussed in Chapter 1. Autism inclusion in Malaysia remains uneven, particularly where teacher preparedness and institutional support are limited (Lee et al., 2022; Yusof et al., 2021). The descriptive findings in Chapter 4 showed that autism inclusive education recorded a lower mean score than leadership communication and parental trust. This indicates that schools may have good intentions and communicate positively, but practical inclusion remains difficult to achieve.

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This has an important implication. Parental trust cannot be sustained by communication alone if classroom support is weak. Parents may appreciate kind words, but they need evidence that the school can consistently support their child. Inclusive practice, therefore, becomes the foundation of trust.

Leadership Communication and Parental Trust

The study found that leadership communication positively influenced parental trust, with a beta value of 0.36. This finding supports Relationship Marketing Theory, which explains that trust develops through reliable, transparent, and consistent communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In education, especially in autism-inclusive education, communication is part of the relationship between the school and the family.

Parents of autistic children often face uncertainty. They need to know how their child behaves in class, how teachers respond to difficulties, whether the child is emotionally safe, and whether progress is being made. When schools communicate honestly, parents feel respected. When schools avoid communication or offer only general reassurance, parents may feel excluded from decisions that affect their child.

This finding also supports Hargreaves and Fullan's (2020) argument that educational trust depends on relational interaction rather than formal promises alone. Trust is formed through repeated contact. It grows when parents experience the school as responsive, calm, and truthful. It weakens when communication is inconsistent or defensive.

In Muslim schools, this finding has a deeper ethical meaning. Communication is not only a managerial skill. It reflects whether the school practices Islamic responsibility in relationships with parents. For autistic children, whose needs may require frequent coordination between school and family, communication is part of care.

Parental Trust and Educational Marketing Outcomes

Parental trust had a strong positive influence on educational marketing outcomes, with a beta value of 0.52. This finding is highly significant because it shows that school reputation is shaped more by trust than by formal promotional efforts. Parents who trust a school are more likely to recommend it, speak positively about it, and strengthen its public image through community networks.

This finding supports Relationship Marketing Theory, which views trust as a basis for commitment, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It also supports the educational marketing literature, which argues that school choice is influenced by reputation, satisfaction, and relational experience (Ivy, 2008). However, the present study adds a more specific insight. For parents of autistic children, reputation is not formed mainly through academic branding or religious identity. It is formed through evidence of care, dignity, and support.

The qualitative findings explain this relationship clearly. Parents relied on recommendations from parent communities, autism support groups, and lived experiences when evaluating schools. The research also recorded the statement of one parent: "The school treated my child with dignity. That is why I continue trusting them." This statement captures the link between trust and reputation. The parent did not refer to advertising. The parent referred to dignity.

This finding suggests that educational marketing in Muslim schools should not be understood narrowly as promotion. For autism inclusive schools, marketing outcomes are earned through relational credibility.

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If the school treats children well, parents become credible advocates. If the school fails to do so, formal marketing cannot repair broken trust easily.

Autism Inclusive Education and Educational Marketing Outcomes

The study also found that autism inclusive education positively influenced educational marketing outcomes, with a beta value of 0.24. This relationship was significant but weaker than the relationship between parental trust and educational marketing outcomes. This suggests that autism inclusion contributes to school reputation, but its stronger effect may occur through parental trust.

This finding should be interpreted carefully. Autism inclusion should never be reduced to a marketing strategy. The primary reasons for inclusion are educational justice, moral responsibility, and the dignity of autistic learners (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). However, when inclusion is practiced sincerely and consistently, it can also strengthen institutional reputation. Parents recognise schools that support vulnerable learners well.

For Muslim schools, this finding is especially meaningful because inclusion reflects moral credibility. A school that supports autistic children with compassion and structure may be seen as practicing Islamic values in a concrete way. A school that fails to support them may damage its reputation, even if it promotes itself as religiously grounded.

The finding therefore links inclusive education with institutional sustainability. Positive inclusion experiences can attract parent confidence and strengthen community support. Poor inclusion experiences can weaken reputation. In this sense, autism inclusion is both an ethical obligation and a source of institutional credibility.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theory in three ways.

First, the study extends Transformational Leadership Theory by applying it to autism-inclusive education in Muslim schools. The findings show that leadership influences both autism inclusive education and leadership communication. However, the Muslim school context adds an ethical dimension to transformational leadership. Leadership is judged not only by effectiveness but also by whether it reflects amanah, adil, ihsan, compassion, and moral responsibility.

Second, the study contributes to Inclusive Education Theory by showing that inclusion is not limited to the classroom. It is connected to leadership systems, parent communication, trust, and institutional reputation. This widens the understanding of autism inclusion from access and adaptation to institutional credibility. Inclusion becomes meaningful when it is supported by leadership and recognised by parents through lived experience.

Third, the study contributes to Relationship Marketing Theory by showing that parental trust is a key mechanism linking school experience to educational marketing outcomes. The findings suggest that in autism inclusive Muslim schools, reputation is not produced mainly through formal promotion. It is produced through trust, dignity, transparent communication, and parental recommendation.

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Together, these theoretical contributions show that autism inclusion in Muslim schools operates across educational, ethical, relational, and reputational dimensions.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for Muslim school leaders.

First, Muslim school leaders should treat autism inclusion as an institutional responsibility rather than an individual teacher burden. Schools need clear procedures for classroom adaptation, behavioural response, parent communication, and referral support. Teacher goodwill is valuable, but it cannot replace institutional systems.

Second, schools should strengthen teacher training in autism awareness, sensory needs, behavioural support, classroom routines, and parent engagement. The qualitative findings showed that limited teacher readiness remains a major concern. Training should be practical and repeated, not limited to one-off awareness sessions.

Third, school leaders should establish transparent communication systems with parents. Parents need regular updates, clear explanations, and respectful consultation. Communication should not occur only when problems arise. It should be part of the school's normal inclusion practice.

Fourth, Muslim schools should ensure that Islamic values are translated into operational practice. Compassion, fairness, and trustworthiness should be reflected in how teachers respond to autistic children, how leaders support families, and how the school handles difficult situations.

Fifth, schools should understand that reputation is built through parent experience. Formal marketing cannot replace trust. Parents of autistic children are likely to recommend schools that treat their children with dignity and communicate honestly.

5.4 Policy Implications

The findings also have implications for policymakers and education authorities.

First, inclusive education support should be extended more clearly to Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions. These schools may not always have the same access to special education resources, training, or specialist support as government schools.

Second, autism inclusion guidelines should include leadership readiness, teacher capacity, parent communication, and ethical care. Policy should not focus only on enrolment or placement. It should also examine the quality of support.

Third, professional development programmes for school leaders should include autism inclusive leadership. Leaders need training not only in administration, but also in managing inclusion systems, supporting teachers, communicating with parents, and protecting student dignity.

Fourth, policymakers should encourage collaboration between schools, parents, therapists, special education professionals, and autism support organisations. Autism inclusion requires coordinated support, especially when schools lack internal expertise.

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5.5 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations.

First, the study used purposive and snowball sampling. These methods were appropriate because the study required respondents with experience in autism inclusion within Muslim educational settings. However, the sample may include participants who were more aware of or interested in autism inclusion. This may limit generalisability.

Second, the study focused on Muslim private schools and Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia. The findings may not fully represent government schools, international schools, or non-Muslim educational institutions. However, this focus was necessary because the study examined the intersection of Muslim school leadership, autism inclusion, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes.

Third, the study used a cross-sectional survey. This means that the quantitative data captured perceptions at one point in time. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to examine how parental trust and school reputation develop over time.

Fourth, the qualitative phase involved 18 participants. Although this was suitable for explaining the quantitative findings, future studies could include a wider range of parents, teachers, school leaders, and special education professionals.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should compare autism inclusion practices across different school systems, including government schools, private secular schools, international schools, tahfiz schools, and non-Muslim faith-based schools. Such comparison would show whether the relationships identified in this study differ by institutional type, governance structure, and resource capacity.

Future studies should also examine teacher readiness as a mediating or moderating variable. The qualitative findings suggest that teacher preparedness may strongly affect whether leadership values translate into actual inclusion practices. This deserves further empirical testing.

Longitudinal research would also be valuable. Parental trust and educational marketing outcomes develop over time through repeated experiences. A longitudinal design could show how trust strengthens or weakens after enrolment, classroom incidents, communication events, or school policy changes.

Future research may also include the voices of autistic students where ethically and developmentally appropriate. Their experiences would deepen understanding of inclusion beyond adult perceptions. This is important because the ultimate purpose of inclusion is not only institutional reputation or parental trust, but the wellbeing and participation of autistic learners.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined Muslim school leadership practices, autism inclusive education, leadership communication, parental trust, and educational marketing outcomes in Malaysian Muslim schools using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The findings showed that all six hypothesised relationships were supported. Muslim school leadership practices strongly influenced leadership communication and

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autism inclusive education. Autism inclusive education and leadership communication strengthened parental trust. Parental trust strongly influenced educational marketing outcomes, while autism inclusive education also contributed directly to school reputation.

The qualitative findings explained these relationships by showing that parents and teachers valued compassionate leadership, transparent communication, teacher readiness, Islamic ethical responsibility, and lived experience. These findings confirm that autism inclusion in Muslim schools is not only a technical special education matter. It is a leadership issue, a communication issue, a trust issue, an ethical issue, and a reputational issue.

The central takeaway is clear: Muslim schools strengthen both inclusion and institutional credibility when they treat autistic children with dignity, support teachers systematically, communicate honestly with parents, and translate Islamic values into daily educational practice.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research paper. The study was conducted independently without any commercial, financial, or institutional influence that could affect the objectivity, interpretation, or presentation of the findings.

9. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors jointly contributed to the development of this paper. All authors also contributed to reviewing and refining the paper, providing intellectual and methodological input, and ensuring its academic rigor and clarity. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication

10. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited capacity during the preparation of this manuscript for language refinement, grammar assistance, structural organisation, and academic writing support. However, all conceptual development, interpretation of findings, analysis, and final academic decisions remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

The author carefully reviewed and validated all generated content to ensure academic integrity, originality, and compliance with scholarly research standards.

11. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to confidentiality and ethical considerations involving parents, teachers, and educational institutions associated with autism related educational experiences, raw interview transcripts and identifiable institutional information are not publicly available.

12. ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with appropriate academic and ethical research standards involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority before the data collection process began.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed of the study's objectives, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before surveys and interviews were conducted.

To protect participant privacy, all names of individuals, schools, and institutions were anonymised throughout the research process. All collected data were stored securely and used strictly for academic purposes only.

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