

Digital Communication and Public Relations Strategy in Islamic Da'wah: A Case Study of Social Media Development at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of science and technology has reshaped religious communication within Islamic educational institutions. In the digital era, pesantren must adapt to evolving communication environments to sustain and expand Islamic da'wah. This study analyzes the Public Relations (PR) strategies implemented by Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain Randuagung in developing social media as a digital communication tool. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and digital observation. The findings indicate that PR plays a crucial role in content creation, audience engagement, and institutional image building. However, challenges remain, including limited content creativity and minimal use of analytics. A comprehensive and sustainable digital communication strategy is essential to strengthen outreach, enhance reputation, and attract prospective students.

Keywords: Public Relations, Social Media, Islamic Boarding School, Digital Communication.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving digital era, social media has become one of the most effective tools for disseminating information and engaging with broader audiences. The transformation of communication patterns from conventional to digital platforms has significantly reshaped how organizations construct meaning, build relationships, and maintain their public image. Within the context of Islamic religious education in Indonesia, digital communication has emerged as a strategic instrument for expanding the reach of da'wah (Islamic preaching) and strengthening institutional legitimacy. Religious education serves as a fundamental pillar in shaping moral character, social responsibility, and civilization. Consequently, Islamic educational institutions are increasingly required to adapt to contemporary communication technologies in order to remain relevant and competitive in a media-saturated environment.

Among the various forms of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) occupy a central role in nurturing religious knowledge, moral discipline, and community leadership. Historically, *pesantren* relied on face-to-face interactions, communal networks, and traditional religious gatherings to disseminate their teachings. However, the development of digital media has transformed these conventional modes of communication. Today, *pesantren* are no longer confined to physical spaces; rather, they operate within hybrid communication environments where online and offline interactions intersect. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube enable *pesantren* to document educational activities, share religious messages, and engage with alumni and prospective students beyond geographical boundaries. In this regard, digital communication not only functions as a channel for information dissemination but also as a strategic mechanism for reputation management and institutional branding.

Public relations (PR) plays a crucial role in navigating this digital transformation. Historically, public relations has existed alongside the development of human civilization, as persuasion and relationship-building have always been integral to social interaction. Newsom et al. (1993) argued that public relations is as old as civilization itself because its activities fundamentally involve persuasive communication. Many of the persuasive tactics used today have been practiced by community leaders for thousands of years. In modern organizational contexts, public relations has evolved into a structured and strategic function designed to manage communication between organizations and their publics. Jenkins (1992) defined public relations as all forms of planned communication, both internal and external, between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives based on mutual understanding. This definition underscores the strategic, deliberate, and relational nature of PR activities.

In the digital era, the scope of public relations has expanded beyond traditional media relations and event management. Digital communication requires PR practitioners to develop competencies in content creation, online engagement, media monitoring, and crisis communication across digital platforms. The emergence of new media has intensified audience participation, allowing publics to actively respond, comment, and share content. As a result, communication has become increasingly dialogic rather than one-directional. The theory of media dependency suggests that audiences rely heavily on media to fulfill informational and social needs, particularly in contexts where media penetration is high (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). In Indonesia, where internet and social media usage continues to grow significantly, religious institutions must recognize that their audiences are embedded within digital networks. Consequently, effective PR strategies must incorporate digital communication practices to maintain relevance and visibility.

Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain, located in Kidul Sawah Hamlet, Tunjung Village, Randuagung District, Lumajang Regency, represents one example of an Islamic educational institution that has embraced digital communication strategies. Recognizing the importance of digital engagement, the *pesantren* has established a public relations function responsible for managing its social media presence. Through platforms such as Instagram, the PR team documents daily educational activities, religious events, community services, and institutional achievements. This strategic adaptation reflects the broader shift among educational institutions toward digital branding and communication management.

The utilization of social media by Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain demonstrates how digital communication can serve multiple functions simultaneously. First, it enables rapid dissemination of information to parents, alumni, and the general public. Second, it fosters transparency by showcasing institutional activities and achievements. Third, it strengthens emotional connections with stakeholders through visual storytelling and interactive engagement. In this sense, social media functions not merely as a technological tool but as a strategic communication arena where institutional identity is constructed and negotiated.

Theoretically, the practice of PR in digital environments can also be examined through the lens of the two-step flow of communication and stimulus-response theory. The two-step flow model suggests that information flows from media to opinion leaders and subsequently to wider audiences, emphasizing the role of intermediaries in shaping public perception (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In the context of pesantren social media management, PR practitioners may act as opinion leaders who curate and frame religious content before it reaches broader audiences. Meanwhile, stimulus-response theory highlights how messages (stimuli) generate audience reactions (responses). In digital communication, these responses manifest through likes, comments, shares, and other engagement metrics, which can be analyzed to assess public perception and institutional impact.

Furthermore, digital communication in religious contexts must consider the interplay between authenticity and strategic presentation. While pesantren are traditionally perceived as modest and community-oriented institutions, their presence on visually driven platforms such as Instagram necessitates aesthetic considerations, branding consistency, and content planning. This transformation reflects the convergence of religious communication and digital branding practices. Scholars have emphasized that digital media enables organizations to build symbolic capital by curating images, narratives, and values that resonate with audiences (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). For pesantren, such symbolic capital may enhance credibility, attract prospective students, and strengthen institutional competitiveness.

Educational institutions, including pesantren, function as complex organizations with diverse stakeholders, including students, parents, alumni, government bodies, and surrounding communities. Each stakeholder group possesses distinct informational needs and expectations. Therefore, public relations within educational institutions must strategically manage communication flows to maintain trust and mutual understanding. In this regard, PR serves not only as a promotional function but also as a managerial role that supports institutional sustainability. The effectiveness of PR is influenced by both expected roles (normative expectations regarding what PR should accomplish) and actual roles (the real practices implemented within the organization). Discrepancies between these roles may arise due to resource limitations, technological challenges, or organizational culture.

The adaptation to digital communication also presents both opportunities and challenges for religious educational institutions. On one hand, digital platforms provide cost-effective channels for outreach, interactive engagement, and content diversification. On the other hand, the rapid flow of information increases vulnerability to misinformation, misinterpretation, and reputational risks. Therefore, PR practitioners in pesantren must develop strategic planning processes that include content scheduling, audience analysis, message framing, and evaluation mechanisms. These practices align with the managerial dimension of PR, which emphasizes research, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Cutlip et al., 2006).

Given these dynamics, this study seeks to examine the public relations strategies implemented by Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain Randuagung, Lumajang, in developing its digital media presence. Specifically, the study aims to analyze how PR practitioners design and manage social media content, how they engage with audiences, and how digital communication influences the pesantren's image and outreach. By focusing on this case, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how traditional religious institutions negotiate modern communication environments.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it provides empirical insights into the integration of digital communication within Islamic educational institutions, a topic that remains underexplored in communication studies. Second, it highlights the evolving role of PR in non-profit religious organizations, demonstrating that strategic communication is not limited to corporate contexts. Third, it offers practical recommendations for pesantren and similar institutions seeking to optimize their digital presence while maintaining their religious values and authenticity.

In conclusion, the digital era has fundamentally transformed the landscape of organizational communication, including within Islamic educational institutions. Social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for pesantren to expand their da'wah, enhance institutional visibility, and build sustainable relationships with stakeholders. However, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on the strategic management of public relations activities. By examining the PR strategies of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain, this study aims to illuminate how digital communication can be harnessed to strengthen institutional image and broaden the reach of Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach to obtain an in-depth and contextualized understanding of public relations (PR) strategies in developing digital communication within an Islamic educational institution. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore meanings, interpretations, and experiences from the perspectives of participants, particularly in examining communication practices in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study method was applied to focus intensively on a single institution, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain Randuagung, Lumajang, as a bounded system operating within a specific social and digital environment (Yin, 2018). This design enabled a comprehensive exploration of how digital communication strategies are conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated by the institution's public relations function.

The primary focus of this research was the Public Relations strategy in developing and managing the social media presence of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain, particularly through Instagram as a digital communication platform. In the context of digital communication, social media serves not only as a channel for disseminating information but also as an interactive space where organizations construct identity, engage stakeholders, and shape public perception. Therefore, this study examined strategic planning, content development processes, audience engagement practices, and the broader implications of digital media utilization for institutional image and outreach.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and digital observation. The primary data source consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the social media manager and PR personnel responsible for managing the official Instagram account of the pesantren. In-depth interviews were selected to obtain detailed insights into the strategic considerations underlying content production, message framing, audience targeting, and engagement practices. The interview process explored several key aspects, including: (1) planning and goal-setting for digital communication; (2) content creation processes, including visual design and religious messaging; (3) strategies for increasing audience engagement; and (4) perceived challenges and opportunities in managing social media within a religious educational context. This approach aligns with qualitative inquiry principles that emphasize rich, descriptive data to understand complex communication processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

In addition to interviews, this study employed non-participant digital observation of the pesantren's official Instagram account (@ponpes.nurulharomainranduagung). Digital observation involved systematically reviewing posted content, captions, visual elements, engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares), and interaction patterns between administrators and followers. Observing digital communication artifacts allowed the researcher to analyze how PR strategies are manifested in actual online practices. This method is particularly relevant in digital communication research, where online platforms function as both communication channels and data sources.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and strategic themes in both interview transcripts and observed digital content. The analysis followed stages of data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, data triangulation was applied by comparing interview findings with observational data. This triangulation ensured consistency between stated strategies and actual digital communication practices.

Through this qualitative case study approach, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital communication strategies are implemented within a pesantren setting and how public relations functions adapt to the demands of contemporary media environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that digital communication has become an inseparable aspect of contemporary social life. Internet-based media and social networking platforms increasingly shape how individuals communicate, learn, conduct economic transactions, and construct social identities. Within this digital ecosystem, religious communication has also undergone significant transformation. Islamic preaching and educational outreach are no longer confined to physical gatherings or traditional sermons; instead, they increasingly take place within digital spaces that allow broader and more immediate audience engagement. However, the openness of social media platforms also creates challenges, as users are free to express opinions that may generate religious or cultural tensions. In such contexts, religious educational institutions hold a strategic responsibility to guide digital discourse and provide credible religious content.

Historically, pesantren were often perceived as institutions that maintained distance from modern technology and public exposure. The findings demonstrate that this perception is gradually shifting. Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain has adopted digital communication practices as part of its institutional development. The pesantren offers several flagship academic programs, including studies of classical Islamic texts such as Nubdatul Bayan, Fan Faraidl, Fan Balaghoh, Qur'an At-Tanzil, and Ushul Fiqh. These programs aim to cultivate comprehensive understanding of Islamic jurisprudence and theological reasoning. Through structured and routine study sessions guided by qualified teachers, students are expected not only to memorize religious rulings but also to comprehend the epistemological foundations underlying Islamic law. The integration of these academic strengths into digital content reflects an effort to align traditional religious scholarship with contemporary communication practices.

The institutional vision of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain emphasizes the formation of morally grounded, knowledgeable, and socially responsible individuals. In this regard, digital communication serves as a strategic extension of the pesantren's educational mission. The results indicate that the pesantren aspires to prepare students to become competent da'i who are capable of conveying Islamic teachings effectively in modern society. This objective resonates with the broader function of public relations, which involves planned communication aimed at achieving mutual understanding between organizations and their publics (Jefkins, 1992). By utilizing social media platforms, the pesantren attempts to present its identity, academic programs, and religious values to a wider audience.

The role of Public Relations within the pesantren is central to the development of its digital presence. Consistent with the managerial perspective of public relations, effective communication requires systematic processes that include fact finding, planning, action and communication, and evaluation (Cutlip et al., 2006). The findings show that the PR function at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain follows these stages, although implementation remains limited in several aspects.

During the fact-finding stage, PR personnel collect documentation of institutional activities such as religious studies, student events, and ceremonial programs. These materials serve as the foundation for constructing digital narratives that portray the pesantren's academic and spiritual environment. This process aligns with the concept of digital storytelling, where visual and textual elements are strategically curated to shape public perception. In the planning stage, PR practitioners determine which activities should be highlighted, how messages should be framed, and what timing is most appropriate for publication. Planning also involves anticipating potential public questions and preparing responses, reflecting the two-way communication model emphasized in modern PR theory (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012).

In the action and communication stage, content is disseminated through various social media platforms, primarily Instagram. The PR team considers posting schedules and platform algorithms to maximize reach. The study indicates, however, that algorithmic literacy remains limited. While the PR team recognizes the importance of timing and engagement, systematic use of data analytics has not yet been fully optimized. Evaluation is conducted by reviewing engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and follower growth. Nevertheless, evaluation tends to be descriptive rather than analytical, suggesting a need for more strategic use of digital analytics tools.

The analysis of social media platforms reveals varying levels of effectiveness. Instagram, established in 2021, contains approximately fifty posts and 295 followers over four years. This relatively modest growth suggests limited content consistency and engagement strategy. Facebook has approximately one thousand followers, yet the majority of posts consist of commemorative messages related to national or Islamic holidays. While such content reflects institutional awareness of significant events, it does not fully showcase the pesantren's flagship programs or daily educational activities. TikTok, launched in mid-2023, includes thirty-eight video posts and 215 followers. Content quality and frequency remain inconsistent, resulting in limited visibility. YouTube has 287 subscribers and thirty uploaded videos. Although some videos have achieved relatively high view counts, the majority focus on specific ceremonial events rather than routine academic life.

These findings highlight a discrepancy between institutional potential and digital execution. From a digital communication perspective, content strategy should emphasize authenticity, storytelling, and audience engagement rather than sporadic documentation. Social media functions as an interactive ecosystem in which visibility is influenced by algorithmic distribution, user engagement, and content relevance (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Without consistent posting schedules and diversified content formats, institutional accounts may struggle to maintain audience attention.

The challenges identified in this study include limited human resources, lack of strategic planning, minimal utilization of analytics tools, and insufficient creative variation in content production. These constraints contribute to low engagement rates and restricted outreach. The limited digital presence also affects institutional reputation. In contemporary society, digital visibility often shapes public perception. Prospective students and parents frequently evaluate educational institutions through online platforms before making enrollment decisions. An inactive or poorly managed social media presence may generate doubts regarding transparency and institutional professionalism.

Furthermore, suboptimal digital communication may weaken relationships with alumni and potential donors. In the digital age, network maintenance increasingly relies on online interaction. Active social media engagement can strengthen alumni loyalty, encourage collaboration, and attract financial support. Conversely, limited online presence may hinder these opportunities. The dependency model of media effects suggests that audiences rely heavily on media for information and orientation (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). When an institution fails to provide accessible and consistent digital information, audiences may seek alternative sources.

The discussion also identifies strategic recommendations for improving digital communication. Establishing a dedicated social media team with competencies in photography, graphic design, copywriting, and analytics is essential. Developing a structured content calendar can ensure consistency and thematic diversity. Inspirational quotations from Ushul Fiqh studies, student testimonials, behind-the-scenes documentation, and short educational videos can enhance engagement. The use of relevant hashtags may improve discoverability, while collaboration with religious influencers can expand audience reach.

Regular evaluation using platform analytics is critical for evidence-based strategy refinement. Instagram Insights, Facebook Analytics, and YouTube Studio provide data on audience demographics, peak engagement times, and content performance. Integrating such

data into planning processes can improve strategic alignment between institutional goals and audience preferences. Two-way communication practices, including timely responses to comments and direct messages, are equally important for community building.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital communication holds significant potential for strengthening the institutional image and outreach of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain. However, effective realization of this potential requires strategic planning, creative innovation, and continuous evaluation. Public relations functions as the bridge between traditional religious education and contemporary digital culture. By embracing systematic digital communication strategies, pesantren can expand their da'wah, enhance transparency, and reinforce public trust in an increasingly interconnected society.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain Randuagung Lumajang has initiated meaningful efforts to integrate digital communication into its institutional development, particularly through the use of Instagram as a primary social media platform. The role of Public Relations is central in this transformation. PR is responsible for content creation, audience engagement, and the strategic management of digital platforms to enhance the pesantren's public image and expand the reach of Islamic preaching. In the context of contemporary digital society, where information flows rapidly and public perception is increasingly shaped online, the presence of pesantren in social media spaces is no longer optional but essential.

However, the findings reveal that the development of social media communication has not yet reached its full potential. Content production remains limited in creativity and consistency, resulting in low engagement and minimal interaction with audiences. The absence of systematic use of analytics tools further restricts the institution's ability to evaluate performance and refine its strategies. Limited insight into content trends, platform algorithms, and audience behavior constrains the effectiveness of digital outreach efforts. As a result, the pesantren's visibility and institutional branding remain suboptimal within the broader digital landscape.

To address these challenges, a comprehensive and sustainable digital communication strategy is required. Establishing a dedicated social media team with relevant competencies, implementing structured content planning, utilizing analytics for continuous evaluation, and strengthening interactive communication practices are essential steps. Collaboration with influencers, religious leaders, and media partners may further expand outreach and credibility. Institutional commitment from pesantren leadership is equally important to ensure adequate resources and long-term consistency.

Overall, this study concludes that strategic public relations management in digital communication can significantly enhance the reach of Islamic da'wah and strengthen institutional reputation. With systematic planning and capacity development, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain has strong potential to optimize social media as an effective tool for education, outreach, and community engagement in the digital era.

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