

Digital Communication Strategies in Islamic Educational Institutions, A Case Study of Public Relations Practices at Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin

Putriana Nur Faizah¹, Faiqoh rohmiyati², Lulu roudlotunisa³

Universitas Islam Syarifuddin Lumajang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia.

Email: putriananurfaizah@gmail.com

Saiful Ridho⁴

PT Kelumajang Siber Media, Lumajang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia.

Email: saifulridho680@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the public relations (PR) strategies employed by Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur to manage social media as a marketing and digital communication tool. Using a qualitative approach with direct observation and documentation, the research examines how PR integrates planning, implementation, and evaluation to enhance institutional visibility, engage audiences, and promote educational programs. Findings indicate that social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok extend pesantren outreach beyond geographical limits, complementing traditional alumni-based promotion. While challenges in content consistency and analytics remain, strategic PR supports interactive communication, relationship building, and institutional branding. This study highlights the role of digital communication in modernizing Islamic educational marketing.

Keywords: *public relations, digital communication, social media, Islamic boarding school,*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools, widely known as *pesantren*, represent one of the oldest and most influential educational institutions in Indonesia. Historically, *pesantren* function not only as residential centers where students, or *santri*, live and study Islamic teachings, but also as social and religious institutions that disseminate Islamic knowledge to broader communities. Traditionally, *pesantren* have been closely associated with the study of classical Islamic texts and Qur'anic memorization under the guidance of respected religious leaders such as the *kyai* and *nyai*. Beyond their educational role, *pesantren* have contributed significantly to the intellectual and moral foundation of Indonesian society, even before the country's independence. As religious institutions embedded in community life, *pesantren* continue to serve as centers of moral authority, spiritual development, and social transformation.

In the contemporary digital era, however, the communication landscape has undergone profound changes. The rapid development of science and technology has reshaped how institutions interact with their publics. Digital communication technologies, particularly social media platforms, have transformed the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed. Communication is no longer linear and one directional; instead, it has become interactive, participatory, and networked. For religious institutions such as Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur, adapting to this digital environment is not merely optional but necessary to sustain relevance and visibility. Social media has become a strategic medium for institutional socialization, information dissemination, and image building.

Digital communication theory emphasizes that communication in online environments is characterized by interactivity, immediacy, and user participation. Unlike traditional mass communication models that position audiences as passive recipients, digital communication views users as active participants who co create meaning and influence institutional narratives. This transformation requires organizations to develop structured strategies in managing their digital presence. In this context, the role of Public Relations becomes increasingly significant. Public Relations is not only responsible for delivering information but also for managing relationships, facilitating dialogue, and maintaining organizational reputation in digital spaces.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon the Excellence Theory of Public Relations developed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt. According to Grunig and Hunt, effective public relations practice goes beyond publicity and information dissemination; it involves strategic management and the cultivation of mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The Excellence Theory identifies four models of public relations practice: press agency, public information, two way asymmetric, and two way symmetric communication. Among these models, the two way symmetric model is considered the most ethical and effective because it emphasizes balanced dialogue and mutual understanding. In the digital communication environment, where audiences can directly respond, comment, and share content, the two way symmetric model becomes particularly relevant. Social media platforms provide opportunities for pesantren to engage in interactive dialogue with students, parents, alumni, and the broader public.

For Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur, social media serves as a medium to introduce institutional facilities, showcase educational activities, highlight student achievements, and communicate religious messages. The integration of public relations strategies into social media management aligns with the notion that PR practitioners function as communication managers who conduct research, evaluate audience responses, and adjust strategies accordingly. Effective digital communication requires systematic planning, content management, and performance evaluation. Therefore, understanding how public relations theory is applied within pesantren becomes essential to assess its communication effectiveness.

In addition to public relations theory, marketing theory also provides a relevant analytical framework. The marketing mix concept introduced by Kotler and Keller explains that organizations use a combination of product, price, place, and promotion to achieve strategic objectives (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Within the context of pesantren, the educational services offered can be understood as the “product,” while social media functions as a

promotional channel that communicates institutional value to prospective students and parents. Social media enables pesantren to present their educational programs, boarding facilities, extracurricular activities, and religious environment in a visually engaging and accessible format.

Furthermore, relationship marketing theory emphasizes the importance of establishing and maintaining long term relationships with stakeholders (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Rather than focusing solely on attracting new students, pesantren must cultivate sustained relationships with existing students, alumni, parents, and community members. Social media platforms facilitate continuous interaction, allowing institutions to maintain engagement beyond physical boundaries. Through consistent communication and responsive interaction, pesantren can strengthen trust and loyalty among their publics.

The role of social media in religious communication can also be understood through the Uses and Gratifications Theory developed by Katz and Blumler. This theory suggests that audiences actively select media channels to satisfy specific psychological and social needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). In the context of pesantren, audiences may use social media to seek religious knowledge, observe institutional credibility, evaluate educational quality, or feel connected to a religious community. Recognizing these motivations enables pesantren to design content that aligns with audience expectations. Instead of merely broadcasting institutional information, pesantren must consider the informational, spiritual, and social gratifications sought by their followers.

Another important concept in digital communication is engagement. Engagement refers to the degree of interaction, participation, and emotional connection between audiences and digital content. High engagement levels indicate that audiences not only consume content but also respond, share, and contribute to conversations. In competitive digital environments where attention is fragmented, increasing engagement becomes crucial for organizational visibility. For pesantren, engagement may take the form of comments on religious messages, shares of educational content, or participation in online discussions. Strategic content planning that integrates storytelling, visual design, and interactive features can enhance engagement and strengthen institutional branding.

From a strategic management perspective, the SWOT analysis framework provides a tool for evaluating internal and external factors influencing digital communication performance. SWOT analysis examines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within an organization's environment. Internally, pesantren may possess strengths such as strong religious credibility, loyal alumni networks, and unique educational programs. However, weaknesses may include limited human resources with digital expertise or inconsistent content production. Externally, opportunities arise from increasing internet penetration and growing public interest in Islamic education. At the same time, threats may include competition from other educational institutions that actively utilize digital platforms. Applying SWOT analysis allows pesantren to formulate strategic decisions that align with their vision and mission.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing social media management in Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur. Public relations theory explains the strategic communication process, marketing theory highlights promotional and relational dimensions, social media theory

clarifies audience motivations and engagement patterns, and strategic management theory offers analytical tools for decision making. Together, these frameworks illuminate how pesantren can optimize digital communication for both religious outreach and institutional development.

In the broader context of Islamic education, adapting to digital communication is not solely about technological adoption but about organizational transformation. Effective social media management requires institutional commitment, professional capacity building, and continuous evaluation. Public relations practitioners within pesantren must develop digital literacy, understand platform algorithms, and utilize analytics tools to measure communication performance. Without systematic management, social media may become a passive information channel rather than a strategic instrument for institutional growth.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how public relations strategies support social media management as a marketing and communication tool within Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur. By situating the analysis within digital communication theory and related conceptual frameworks, the research aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on the transformation of religious institutions in the digital era. The findings are expected to provide insights into how pesantren can strengthen their institutional image, expand outreach, and maintain meaningful relationships with diverse publics through strategic digital communication.

In conclusion, the digital era presents both challenges and opportunities for pesantren. As traditional centers of Islamic learning, pesantren must preserve their religious authenticity while embracing innovative communication strategies. The integration of public relations, marketing, social media engagement, and strategic management theories offers a holistic understanding of how digital communication can be effectively managed. Through structured planning, interactive dialogue, and continuous evaluation, pesantren can enhance their visibility, credibility, and sustainability in an increasingly networked society.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the public relations strategies implemented by Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur in managing social media as a digital communication tool. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it enables an in depth understanding of social phenomena, organizational communication processes, and meaning construction within specific contexts. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research seeks to interpret the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. In the context of this research, the qualitative approach allows the researcher to examine how public relations strategies are conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated within the pesantren's digital communication practices.

This study is grounded in communication theory, particularly the two way symmetric model of public relations proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). This model emphasizes reciprocal communication between organizations and their publics, aiming to achieve mutual understanding rather than one sided persuasion. In digital environments, social media platforms facilitate dialogic interaction, making the two way symmetric model highly relevant.

By applying this theoretical lens, the study analyzes how communication flows between the pesantren and its audiences, including students, parents, alumni, and the broader community. The research also considers digital communication principles, which highlight interactivity, participation, and feedback as essential components of effective online engagement.

Data collection was conducted through observation and documentation. Observation is a systematic technique of gathering data by directly examining behaviors, activities, and interactions within their natural setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, the researcher conducted direct, non mediated observations at the research site to obtain authentic and contextual information regarding communication practices. The observation focused on three primary aspects: the physical environment of the pesantren, the actors involved in social media management, and the activities related to content production and dissemination. By observing these elements, the researcher was able to understand how digital communication strategies are operationalized in everyday institutional practices.

In addition to observation, the researcher collected supporting documentation in the form of photographs, videos, written records, and digital content published on the pesantren's social media platforms. These materials served as empirical evidence of communication activities and provided insights into message construction, visual representation, and audience engagement. Documentation analysis also enabled the researcher to examine how the pesantren presents its identity, values, facilities, and educational programs to the public.

The selection of qualitative methodology is based on the researcher's objective to comprehensively describe and interpret the public relations strategies used by the pesantren. Rather than measuring variables quantitatively, this study aims to understand processes, meanings, and interactions within the communication environment. Through direct observation and systematic documentation, the researcher sought to ensure data validity and contextual richness. The integration of communication theory into the methodological framework strengthens the analytical depth of the study by linking empirical findings with established theoretical perspectives.

Overall, this methodological approach enables a holistic examination of how public relations functions within the digital communication landscape of an Islamic boarding school. By combining qualitative inquiry, direct observation, and theoretical grounding in public relations and digital communication theory, the study provides a nuanced understanding of strategic communication practices in contemporary religious educational institutions

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine the public relations strategies implemented in managing social media as a marketing tool at Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur. The findings indicate that the pesantren has begun to institutionalize its public relations function through structured social media management handled by designated administrators within the boarding environment. Public relations activities are conceptualized as planned communication efforts directed both internally and externally to build mutual understanding between the institution and its publics. In the context of digital communication, this function extends beyond information dissemination to include relationship management, image construction, and audience engagement.

The results show that the pesantren applies a strategic communication approach consisting of four main stages: planning, needs assessment, implementation, and evaluation. These stages reflect core principles of strategic management and align with the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, particularly the two way symmetric model proposed by Grunig and Hunt. The communication process does not merely aim to persuade audiences but to create dialogue and foster institutional credibility. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are utilized to distribute religious messages, highlight institutional facilities, and showcase student achievements.

At the planning stage, public relations administrators design content programs based on current digital trends and the informational needs of the broader community. Content themes include religious sermons, daily student activities, extracurricular programs, and institutional achievements. The planning process involves determining content flow, assigning responsibilities to team members, and preparing scripts that ensure clarity and coherence of messages. This structured approach demonstrates that communication activities are not spontaneous but strategically organized to achieve long term institutional objectives. From a marketing perspective, this stage corresponds with the promotion element of the marketing mix, where social media serves as the primary channel to introduce the pesantren's educational services to prospective students and parents.

The needs assessment stage reveals several challenges faced by the social media management team. Based on interviews and observations, one significant issue is the difficulty in identifying credible and authentic religious content in digital spaces. The abundance of online Islamic content often includes misleading interpretations or superficial messaging. As a result, public relations officers must carefully curate content to ensure theological accuracy and alignment with institutional values. This finding underscores the importance of credibility in religious digital communication. In line with Uses and Gratifications Theory, audiences actively seek media content that fulfills their informational and spiritual needs. Therefore, content authenticity and clarity become critical factors influencing audience trust and engagement.

During the implementation stage, public relations administrators provide guidance to students involved in content production. Students are directed on message delivery, language use, tone, and expression to ensure that communication remains effective and respectful. Trial recordings are conducted before final production to refine narrative structure and presentation style. This process reflects an understanding that digital communication requires not only theological substance but also technical competence and aesthetic appeal. Engagement in social media is influenced by visual quality, storytelling techniques, and audience relatability. By involving students in content creation, the pesantren also fosters participatory communication, which strengthens internal engagement and institutional identity.

The evaluation stage involves reviewing content performance and identifying areas for improvement. Public relations officers analyze which types of posts generate higher engagement in terms of views, comments, and shares. Although the use of advanced analytics tools remains limited, administrators rely on observable interaction indicators to assess effectiveness. Evaluation results are documented and used as references for future content development. This cyclical process aligns with strategic communication theory, which emphasizes continuous assessment and adaptation in response to environmental changes. In

digital communication, feedback is immediate and measurable, making evaluation an essential component of sustainable strategy.

The findings further indicate that social media has enhanced institutional visibility. Through consistent publication of video content and informational posts, the pesantren has increased public awareness regarding its facilities, programs, and achievements. Community members can access information without visiting the physical location, allowing them to evaluate educational quality remotely. This accessibility contributes to broader outreach and potential growth in student enrollment. Marketing objectives such as increasing institutional recognition and attracting prospective students are supported through systematic digital communication efforts.

From the perspective of relationship marketing theory, social media functions as a platform for maintaining long term relationships with stakeholders. Alumni, parents, and community members can remain connected to institutional developments through regular updates. Interactive features such as comments and direct messages enable two way communication, reflecting the principles of symmetrical communication. Although the interaction level varies depending on content type, the presence of dialogic communication channels demonstrates the pesantren's willingness to engage with its audiences.

However, the study also identifies several limitations. Human resource capacity in digital media management remains relatively constrained. Content production is often dependent on a small team, which may affect consistency and innovation. In addition, the absence of systematic data analytics limits the institution's ability to measure strategic impact comprehensively. While engagement indicators provide preliminary insights, more structured performance measurement would enhance decision making processes. From a SWOT perspective, these limitations represent internal weaknesses that need to be addressed through capacity building and training in digital literacy.

Opportunities for development are significant. The increasing penetration of social media usage among Indonesian youth presents a favorable external environment. Religious content remains highly consumed in digital spaces, suggesting that pesantren have strong potential to expand influence through well designed communication strategies. Collaboration with alumni networks and religious figures could further amplify outreach and credibility. By strengthening technical skills and adopting data driven evaluation methods, the pesantren can maximize these opportunities.

In summary, the results demonstrate that public relations strategies at Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur have begun to align with contemporary digital communication principles. The integration of planning, needs assessment, implementation, and evaluation reflects a strategic approach to social media management. Communication practices emphasize credibility, participation, and institutional image building. Although challenges remain in resource capacity and analytics utilization, the overall strategy indicates a progressive adaptation to the digital era.

The discussion highlights that effective digital communication within religious institutions requires a balance between theological authenticity and strategic management. Public relations plays a central role in ensuring that communication efforts are structured, interactive, and aligned with institutional objectives. Through continuous improvement and

theoretical grounding in communication and marketing principles, pesantren can strengthen their competitive position while maintaining their core religious identity. Ultimately, social media management supported by strategic public relations contributes not only to marketing outcomes but also to sustainable institutional development in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the public relations strategy in supporting social media management as a marketing tool at Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur within the framework of digital communication theory. Drawing from the introduction, methodology, results, and discussion, it can be concluded that the pesantren has begun to implement a structured and strategic communication approach that integrates traditional values with contemporary digital practices.

Historically, the pesantren relied primarily on alumni networks as its main marketing channel. Alumni who possess a strong emotional attachment and pride toward their alma mater actively introduce the institution's programs and strengths to the wider community. This word of mouth strategy reflects relationship marketing principles, where trust and long term relational bonds become key drivers of institutional reputation. Alumni function not only as former students but also as informal ambassadors who reinforce the pesantren's credibility in society. Their advocacy demonstrates that emotional engagement and institutional loyalty remain powerful assets in educational marketing.

However, in response to the demands of globalization and rapid technological advancement, the pesantren has expanded its marketing strategy by incorporating social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This shift indicates an adaptation to digital communication environments characterized by interactivity, accessibility, and networked participation. Through these platforms, public relations administrators disseminate information about educational programs, facilities, student achievements, and religious activities. Social media enables the pesantren to reach audiences beyond geographical boundaries, thereby strengthening its institutional visibility and competitiveness.

The findings demonstrate that the public relations strategy follows systematic stages of planning, needs assessment, implementation, and evaluation. This structured approach aligns with the principles of strategic communication and the two way symmetric model of public relations, emphasizing dialogue and mutual understanding between the institution and its publics. Although the use of analytics and digital evaluation tools remains limited, observable audience engagement indicates that the pesantren's digital presence has positively influenced public awareness.

The impact of this marketing strategy on institutional development is evident in several aspects. First, the pesantren now possesses clearer objectives in promoting its educational services. Strategic communication planning has enabled the institution to define its target audiences and articulate its value propositions more effectively. Second, the availability of digital marketing channels provides adequate promotional infrastructure, allowing information dissemination to occur consistently and efficiently. Third, the marketing strategy has encouraged internal motivation to improve and innovate educational programs. Increased public exposure creates constructive pressure to enhance service quality and maintain

institutional credibility. Finally, the pesantren demonstrates greater confidence in competing within the modern educational landscape while preserving its identity as a traditional Islamic boarding school.

In conclusion, the integration of alumni based marketing and digital communication strategies has contributed to the progressive development of Pondok Pesantren Kyai Syarifuddin Asrama Dalem Utara–Dalem Timur. Public relations plays a central role in ensuring that communication efforts are strategic, participatory, and aligned with institutional goals. By continuing to strengthen digital competencies, optimize content management, and maintain authentic relationships with stakeholders, the pesantren can sustain its growth and relevance in the evolving digital era.

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