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Exploring the Paradox of Islamic Boarding School Digital Marketing between the Values of Politeness and the Demands of Social Media Algorithms

Rifka Jannatul Firdausiyah[1]✉, Muhammad Durrin Ni'am[2], Ittaqillah Haitsuma Kunta[3], Siti Nur Aviatun Hasanah [4], Moh. Kamil[5] , Abd. Muis[6], Mona Novita[7]
[1,2,3,4,5,6] Nurul Jadid University, Paiton, Indonesia

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(✉) *Correspondence*
rifkakaka33@gmail.com

Abstract:
This study aims to understand how Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) manage the paradox between the value of politeness and the demands of social media algorithms in digital marketing practices. This phenomenon is crucial because Islamic boarding schools are faced with the need to remain relevant in the digital space without losing their foundational values. A qualitative approach was used, with a case study design at the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri. Data were collected through direct observation and in-depth interviews with administrators, the media team, and students involved in content production. Data were then analyzed step by step to identify emerging patterns and meanings. The results show that Islamic boarding schools engage in a continuous negotiation process between maintaining politeness and adapting to the logic of the algorithm. Communication styles are made lighter and more adaptive, while remaining within the boundaries of maintained values. On the other hand, algorithms also influence content production patterns, particularly in the tendency to repeat formats deemed effective. This condition creates a hybrid communication identity, where depth of substance is maintained while presented in a simpler manner. These findings illustrate that digital adaptation does not always lead to a loss of values, but can instead provide a space for formulating new, more contextual forms of communication. This study is expected to enrich the discourse on religious digital communication and serve as a practical reference for Islamic boarding schools in managing media wisely amidst the pressures of digital systems.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Islamic boarding school digital marketing presents a significant gap between Islamic communication theory and social media practice (Aisyah & Rofiah, 2022). Conceptually, Islamic boarding schools emphasize the values of politeness, honesty, and blessings in conveying messages (Jannah,

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2025). However, the logic of social media algorithms actually encourages provocative, quickly viral, and often sensational content. On the ground, many educational institution accounts, including Islamic boarding schools, have begun adopting a more "busy" communication style to reach a wider audience. This creates a dilemma: maintain the dignity of Islamic values or comply with the demands of digital visibility (Mundiri et al., 2021). This situation is clearly evident in the practice of Islamic preaching content, which has begun to be packaged with bombastic titles or emotional video clips. While this strategy is effective in increasing engagement, it also has the potential to obscure the essence of the message. Thus, a gap between normative ideals and digital reality continues to widen. This issue is not merely technical but also touches on the ethical aspects of Islamic communication, the foundation of Islamic boarding schools. Real-world conditions demonstrate that Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are no longer confined to isolated social spaces but are directly connected to the global digital ecosystem.

This change demands rapid adaptation to algorithm-driven information distribution patterns (Sudarwan, 2025). Many Islamic boarding school media managers face pressure to consistently produce relevant, engaging, and trend-setting content to avoid being lost in the flood of information (Sa'diyah et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a tendency to compromise with a more popular delivery style over substance. This practice is evident in the use of clickbait, dramatic editing, and the selection of more controversial topics to attract users' attention (Fanani & Hidayah, 2024). Yet, the primary value of Islamic boarding schools lies in serenity, depth of knowledge, and ethical conduct in preaching. This tension reflects the process of identity negotiation between tradition and modernity (Saputra et al., 2025). This reality demonstrates that digital transformation is not simply a change in medium, but also a shift in communication paradigms. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how Islamic boarding schools respond to these pressures without losing their identity.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between da'wah (Islamic preaching) and digital media, particularly in the context of message dissemination effectiveness. These studies generally highlight increased audience reach and changes in religious information consumption patterns (Fanani & Hidayah, 2024). Some findings indicate that the use of social media can expand the influence of religious institutions, but also has the potential to diminish the depth of audience understanding (Sain, 2025). However, research specifically addressing the ethical dilemma between Islamic boarding school values of politeness and the demands of algorithms is still limited. This research aims to fill this gap by taking a more critical approach to the paradox. Unlike previous studies, which tend to emphasize technical aspects and benefits, this study focuses on the value tensions that emerge in Islamic boarding school digital marketing practices. Thus, the contribution offered is not only descriptive but also reflective of the direction of development of Islamic boarding school communication in the digital era.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to combine the perspective of Islamic communication ethics with an analysis of social media algorithms in the context of Islamic boarding schools. Previously, these two aspects were often studied separately without addressing the dynamic interaction between them.

This research presents an integrative approach that examines not only "what has changed," but also "why the change occurred" and "how it impacts the core values of Islamic boarding schools." By positioning Islamic boarding schools as subjects actively negotiating with technology, this research provides a new perspective in the study of digital religious communication (Lesmanah et al., 2020). This novelty is also evident in the focus on paradox, rather than mere adaptation. This means that this research not only observes the success of digital strategies but also critiques the consequences that arise.

This approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics faced by Islamic boarding schools in maintaining a balance between digital existence and value integrity. Based on this description, this research aims to answer the main question: how do Islamic boarding schools manage the paradox between the value of politeness and the demands of social media algorithms in digital marketing practices? This question is crucial because it concerns the sustainability of Islamic boarding school identity amidst massive digitalization. To answer this question, this research will explore communication strategies, the forms of compromise that occur, and their impact.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, as its primary focus is to deeply understand the paradoxical phenomenon of digital marketing in the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). This approach was chosen so that researchers could capture the dynamics of meaning, values, and communication practices that cannot be measured numerically. The case study allows for a more detailed exploration of the interaction between Islamic boarding school values of politeness and the demands of social media algorithms in real-life situations (Manshur et al., 2024). Thus, this research not only describes the phenomenon but also interprets the processes underlying it. The research location was determined to be Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri. This location was chosen based on the consideration that Kwagean is one of the Islamic boarding school educational centers that is quite active in utilizing digital media as a means of da'wah and public communication. Furthermore, the diversity of communication styles used by media managers in this environment provides a rich space to observe the negotiation between traditional values and digital strategies. This environment also represents an Islamic boarding school that is transforming without completely abandoning its traditional roots (Sa'diyah et al., 2025).

The sources of information in this study were obtained from purposively selected informants, namely individuals directly involved in the management of Islamic boarding schools' digital media. Informants included Islamic boarding school administrators, media teams or social media administrators, and students involved in content production. This selection was carried out to ensure the data obtained was truly relevant to the research focus. Furthermore, the diverse perspectives of the informants were expected to enrich our understanding of how digital communication decisions are made and implemented. The data collection process was conducted through direct observation and in-depth interviews. Observations were used to concretely observe how content is produced, packaged, and published, including how interactions occur on social media. Meanwhile, the interviews were conducted semi-structured to ensure the

researcher maintained a clear direction for the questions, while still allowing informants to freely explain their experiences and perspectives. The combination of these two techniques enabled the researcher to obtain data that was not only factual but also contextual. Data analysis was carried out in stages through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the initial stage, the collected data was selected to focus on information relevant to the research theme. Next, the data was organized into narrative form and categories to clearly identify emerging patterns. The final stage involves interpreting the findings to answer the research questions and test the initial arguments. This process is repeated to ensure that the analysis results accurately reflect the conditions on the ground.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Negotiating the Value of Politeness in Digital Content Strategy

Research findings reveal that negotiating politeness values within digital content strategies within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is interpreted as an effort to adapt digital communication styles to the prevailing norms of etiquette within the pesantren, while maintaining the need to ensure content remains appealing to a wider audience. At the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, this practice is evident in the choice of polite language, the use of appropriate religious terms, and the restriction of visual expression to maintain alignment with Islamic boarding school values. This negotiation process occurs when content managers must balance maintaining the institution's dignity and adhering to the more relaxed dynamics of digital communication (Abdurrahman, 2025). An interview with the first informant revealed that "we have to be careful in choosing our words, not to appear too free-flowing because it carries the name of the pesantren." This statement demonstrates a strong awareness of the institution's identity, which must be maintained in the digital space. Meanwhile, the second informant stated that "if it's too formal, it's sometimes less appealing, so we still incorporate a light-hearted style of language, but don't overstep the boundaries." From these two perspectives, the researchers observed a trade-off between the desire to reach a younger audience and the obligation to maintain typical Islamic boarding school politeness. This confirms that the language strategy used was not a spontaneous decision, but rather the result of careful consideration.

Observations indicate that the content produced tends to use gentle language with clear sentence structure, avoiding terms that could potentially be interpreted differently. The visuals displayed are also simple and not overdone, reflecting the value of simplicity upheld in Islamic boarding schools (Najiburrahman et al., 2025). In interactions with audiences, account managers consistently use respectful greetings and non-confrontational responses. Researchers interpret this pattern as a form of internalizing politeness values into digital practices, so that the content produced still represents the Islamic boarding school's identity even in a more open space. These observations demonstrate that content managers at the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri consciously adapt their digital communication style to align with the Islamic boarding school's politeness values, while striving to maintain the content's appeal to a wider audience. The emerging trend demonstrates a consistent use of

polite language combined with a lighter communication style (Khofsah, 2025). Negotiations are carried out continuously, especially in determining diction, visual style, and how to respond to the audience, so that a balance is created between the traditional values of Islamic boarding schools and the demands of modern digital communication.

Table 1. Researcher's Findings

Aspects of Findings	Field Findings	Researcher Interpretation
Operational definition	Adapting digital communication to Islamic boarding school norms without reducing its attractiveness.	Efforts to balance Islamic boarding school values and digital communication needs.
Language selection practice	Polite language, religious terms, and visual restrictions in accordance with Islamic boarding school values.	The choice of language and visuals is done carefully to maintain the dignity of the institution.
Interview results	Careful in choosing words, but still adjusting the style so as not to be too stiff.	There is a tug of war between institutional politeness and the needs of young audiences.
Observation results	Soft language, simple visuals, and polite interactions.	Politeness has become standard in digital practice.
Pola temuan	Polite language is consistently combined with a light style.	There is a balance between traditional values and modern digital demands.

Dominance of Algorithmic Logic in Determining Content Production

The dominance of algorithmic logic in determining content production at the KwageanIslamic Boarding School in Kediri is understood to reflect the tendency of the school's digital media managers to use platform performance patterns, such as number of views, interactions, and reach, as the primary basis for determining content format and themes. In practice, this is evident in production decisions that rely heavily on content that has previously attracted public attention. Thus, production direction is influenced not only by the school's values but also by the digital system mechanisms that determine content visibility. One media team stated that "if a particular type of content has already been popular, we usually repeat it with a similar theme to ensure it continues to reach a large audience." This statement indicates a tendency to follow patterns deemed "preferred" by the system. Meanwhile, another media team stated that "we actually want to be more varied, but sometimes we worry that if it doesn't conform to the algorithm, no one will see it." From these two statements, researchers interpret that creative decisions are not entirely free, as there is a strong consideration of the performance produced by the platform system. This demonstrates the indirect pressure of the algorithm on the production process.

Based on observations, uploaded content exhibits a repetitive pattern, particularly in short videos with engaging openings. The themes raised also tend to follow emerging trends, although they are still framed within the context of Islamic boarding school values. Content variation appears limited, with a tendency to maintain formats that have proven effective. Researchers believe this practice reflects an adaptation to algorithmic logic, where the success of previous content is used as a primary reference in subsequent production. This description

suggests that content production at the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri is heavily influenced by the platform's algorithmic operation. Content managers adapt ideas and formats based on what they deem capable of increasing reach and engagement. This phenomenon demonstrates the repetition of relatively similar formats and themes, with a primary focus on optimizing performance (Zain, 2025). Algorithms serve as an indirect reference that shapes production decisions, so the space for creative exploration tends to be limited by considerations of effective content distribution.

The Identity Paradox Between Scientific Authority and Digital Popularity

The identity paradox in this context refers to the situation where Islamic boarding schools must maintain their tradition-based scholarly authority while simultaneously being required to maintain a popular presence in the digital space (Hidayat, 2025) . At the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, this situation is evident in the efforts to present content that still reflects the depth of religious knowledge, but is packaged in a lighter, more accessible format for a wider audience. Tension arises when the relatively serious scholarly standards must be juxtaposed with a fast, concise, and attention-grabbing digital communication style (Rusadi & Achmad, 2025). The reality on the ground demonstrates a growing unease about presenting religious material in the digital space. Overly serious and in-depth presentations tend to be less appealing to audiences, while attempts to make them more lighthearted actually raise concerns about diminishing the meaning contained within (Sudarsono, 2025) . On the other hand, there is a strong push to maintain the image of an institution grounded in scholarship, rather than simply presenting entertainment content. This situation demands adjustments in delivery methods to remain relevant to the characteristics of digital audiences. From this, researchers observed a collective awareness of maintaining a balance between depth of substance and attractive presentation, despite the pressures of popularity that tend to encourage message simplification.

Observations indicate that the resulting content tends to combine educational and popular elements. For example, religious material is presented in short chunks with more conversational language and packaged in an attractive visual format. However, there are certain limitations to the simplification of the material, evident in the retention of typical Islamic boarding school terminology. Researchers interpret this practice as a form of compromise, where the Islamic boarding school strives to maintain its scholarly credibility while remaining relevant in the digital space. This description confirms that the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri faces a dilemma in building its digital identity: maintaining scholarly authority and meeting the demands of popularity in digital media. This situation indicates a consistent effort to combine these two interests through simplification of delivery without losing the main substance. The resulting identity is hybrid, where scholarly values are maintained but packaged with an approach more adaptive to the characteristics of the digital audience.

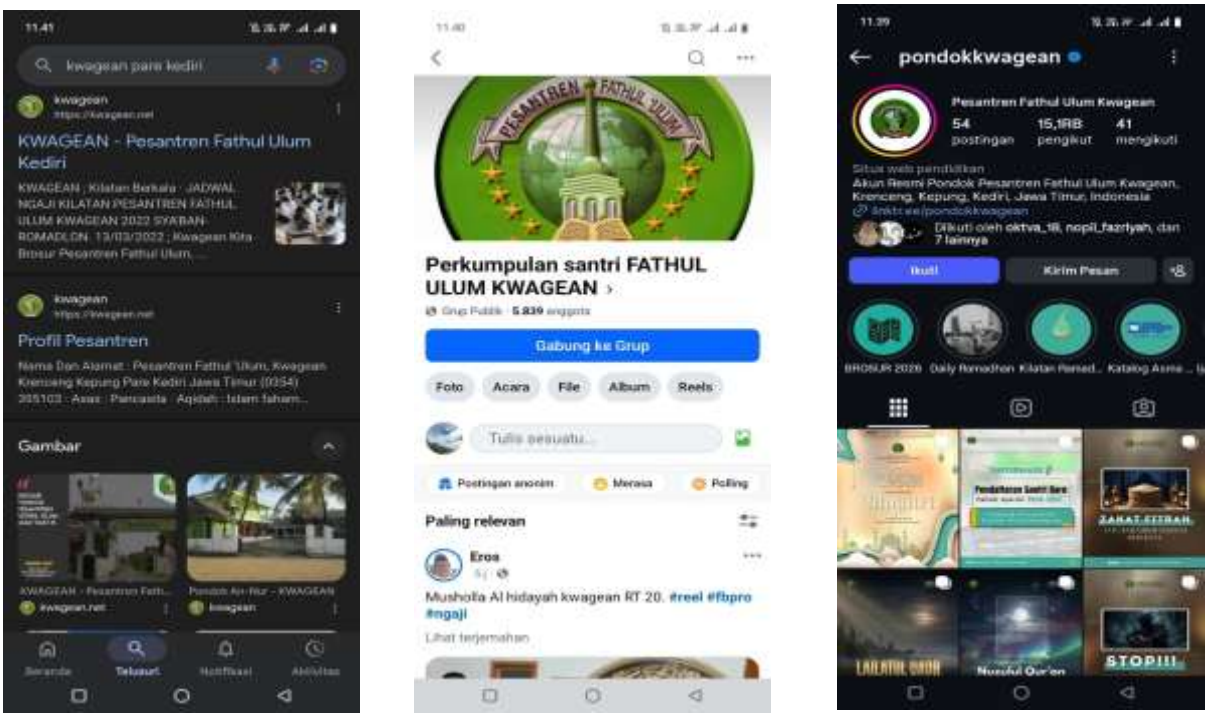

Figure 1. Website, Instagram, and Facebook platforms of the Kwagean Kediri Islamic Boarding School

The Instagram profile photo reflects a negotiation of politeness values, evident in its simple yet engaging visuals. Furthermore, the choice of a "safe" and familiar appearance also demonstrates the influence of algorithmic logic, as it tends to use formats easily recognized by the audience. On the other hand, the use of Islamic boarding school symbols emphasizes a scholarly identity, albeit in a lighthearted manner. The Facebook profile photo above represents a more formal form of politeness, in keeping with Islamic boarding school communication norms. It doesn't strictly follow visual trends, thus demonstrating the algorithm's more limited influence. However, there is still an effort to maintain a balance between formal image and public accessibility, reflecting the identity paradox of authority and popularity. The Islamic boarding school website is the strongest representation of politeness values and scholarly authority, with its neat and informative appearance. It is barely influenced by algorithmic logic, emphasizing depth of substance. This demonstrates the website's position as a reaffirmation of the Islamic boarding school's identity amidst digital demands. In essence, these three photos demonstrate that the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri consistently negotiates politeness, faces algorithmic pressure, and manages the paradox between scholarly authority and digital popularity through visual adjustments across platforms.

DISCUSSION

The Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri aligns with the literature on religious digital communication, which emphasizes a shift from in-depth communication to a more concise and audience-adaptive approach. Several

previous studies have revealed that social media encourages the simplification of messages for easier consumption, and this is evident in Islamic boarding school content practices (Nabila Nadia, 2025). However, unlike some studies that view this phenomenon as a decline in the quality of da'wah (Islamic outreach), this study's findings demonstrate a conscious effort to maintain politeness as a core value. This means there is agreement regarding digital pressures, but differences in how they respond. Islamic boarding schools are not completely absorbed by the platform's logic, but continue to select values in every content production (Sayyidina & Ahmad, 2024). The negotiation between politeness and algorithmic demands demonstrates two sides coexisting in Islamic boarding school digital communication practices Adapting delivery styles has been shown to increase audience reach and enhance opportunities for public interaction . This situation allows Islamic boarding schools to aintain presence and be taken into account in the competitive digital space (Suriadi et al., 2025). However, the tendency to follow more popular communication patterns also carries the consequence of simplifying religious messages. In some situations, the depth of meaning, which should be a key strength, is potentially diminished due to the demands of concise and attention-grabbing presentations. Thus, achieving digital visibility does not always align with the quality of the message's substance.

Upon further investigation, this tendency is not coincidental but rather closely related to the workings of platform algorithms that shape content production patterns. Digital systems consistently prioritize content with high levels of interaction, indirectly encouraging media managers to adjust their production strategies (Abror & Sukmawati, 2025). Consequently, choices regarding format, theme, and delivery style are often based more on past performance than on exploring new ideas. In this context, algorithms act as structures that influence the direction of communication, not through direct coercion, but through incentive mechanisms that direct content production preferences. In this context, Islamic boarding school media managers tend to repeat formats that have proven effective due to the structural incentives of the platform system. This explains why content variety is limited and creativity often remains within safe limits. In other words, it's not simply an individual choice; rather, digital structures systematically influence the direction of content production. Furthermore, the identity paradox discovered demonstrates the process of hybrid identity formation in Islamic boarding school communication. Previous literature has extensively discussed the commodification of religion in digital media, but these findings reveal a more complex nuance (Setiawati et al., 2025). Islamic boarding schools do not fully commodify values, but rather adapt while retaining scholarly symbols (Hafiz, 2025).This simplification does not mean the elimination of meaning, but rather a strategy to ensure the message remains accessible to a wider audience. The implication is that scholarly authority is not lost, but rather undergoes a transformation in the form of delivery. This indicates that the changes occurring are more evolutionary than disruptive. Overall, this discussion confirms that the paradox between the values of politeness and the demands of algorithms is not a conflict that must be resolved in a clear-cut manner, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation. The primary cause lies in the logical difference between meaning-oriented Islamic communication ethics and performance-oriented digital algorithms. Both create a tug-of-war that

shapes current Islamic boarding school communication practices (Hayati et al., 2025). An important implication of this situation is the need for critical awareness in managing digital media to prevent adaptation from turning into excessive compromise. In this way, Islamic boarding schools can remain relevant without losing the foundational values that serve as their primary identity.

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CONCLUSION

This research confirms that Islamic boarding schools, particularly the Kwagean Islamic Boarding School in Kediri, do not simply submit to the logic of social media algorithms in digital marketing practices. The paradox between the values of politeness and the demands of visibility is managed through an ongoing negotiation process. Media managers adjust their communication style to be more lighthearted and accessible, while still maintaining the boundaries of adab (civility) as a core identity. This balance is not simply the result of simple considerations, but rather the result of a selection between the need to reach an audience and uphold the dignity of the Islamic boarding school.

Politeness remains present, albeit in a more flexible form. Religious messages are packaged concisely and communicatively without completely losing their meaning. On the other hand, content production patterns are inextricably linked to the influence of algorithms, which encourage the repetition of formats deemed effective. This demonstrates that digital success is not simply about following trends, but about maintaining values amidst the pressures of popularity. Scientifically, this research enriches the study of digital religious communication by connecting Islamic communication ethics and algorithmic mechanisms in a single reading. This approach presents the perspective that the changes occurring are more of an adaptation process than a drastic shift in values. The limitations of this study lie in its focus on a single Islamic boarding school and its lack of broad audience perspectives. Future research with a more diverse

scope, including locations, ages, and backgrounds, along with quantitative methods, is needed to achieve more comprehensive results. Ultimately, this dynamic demonstrates that the digital space presents not only challenges but also opportunities, as long as Islamic boarding schools maintain their values amidst the tide of change.

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