

The Collaborative Reputation Communication System: An Integrated Governance Framework for Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract:

Islamic higher education institutions increasingly depend on strategic communication to build trust, reputation, and competitiveness. However, previous studies often examine public relations governance, leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, and reputation separately, leaving their interaction insufficiently explained. This study aims to develop and qualitatively substantiate the Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS) as an integrated framework for strengthening institutional outcomes. A qualitative multisite case study used semi-structured interviews with 30 purposively selected participants, supported by participant observation and document analysis. Data were analyzed through condensation, display, open and axial coding, thematic development, cross-site comparison, and conclusion verification. The findings indicate that public relations has evolved from a technical information function into a strategic governance mechanism coordinating institutional communication, digital visibility, stakeholder relationships, and reputation management. Leadership communication reinforces this mechanism by fostering organizational coherence, transparency, trust, and legitimacy. The cross-site findings demonstrate that competitiveness emerges through the continuous interaction of communication governance, leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, institutional performance, and reputation. The CRCS offers an integrated framework for enhancing institutional reputation, sustainability, and competitiveness across diverse Islamic higher education contexts.

Keywords: *Strategic Communication, Institutional Reputation, Islamic Higher Education*

Abstrak:

Perguruan tinggi Islam semakin bergantung pada komunikasi strategis untuk membangun kepercayaan, reputasi, dan daya saing institusi. Namun, penelitian sebelumnya cenderung mengkaji tata kelola hubungan masyarakat, komunikasi kepemimpinan, keterlibatan pemangku kepentingan, dan reputasi secara terpisah, sehingga interaksi antarkomponen tersebut belum banyak dijelaskan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengembangkan dan menguatkan secara kualitatif Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS) sebagai kerangka terpadu untuk memperkuat capaian institusi. Penelitian menggunakan studi kasus multisitus kualitatif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap 30 partisipan yang dipilih secara purposif, didukung observasi partisipatif dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, pengodean terbuka dan aksial, pengembangan tema, perbandingan lintas situs, serta verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hubungan masyarakat telah

berkembang dari fungsi teknis penyampaian informasi menjadi mekanisme tata kelola strategis yang mengoordinasikan komunikasi institusi, visibilitas digital, hubungan pemangku kepentingan, dan manajemen reputasi. Komunikasi kepemimpinan memperkuat mekanisme tersebut melalui koherensi organisasi, transparansi, kepercayaan, dan legitimasi. Daya saing muncul dari interaksi berkelanjutan antara tata kelola komunikasi, komunikasi kepemimpinan, keterlibatan pemangku kepentingan, kinerja institusi, dan reputasi. CRCS menawarkan kerangka terpadu untuk meningkatkan reputasi, keberlanjutan, dan daya saing perguruan tinggi Islam.

Kata Kunci: *Komunikasi Strategis, Reputasi Institusi, Perguruan Tinggi Islam*

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic higher education institutions face increasing demands for academic quality, accountability, digital responsiveness, graduate competitiveness, and public trust. Their performance is assessed not only through education, research, and community service but also through governance transparency, communication consistency, stakeholder responsiveness, and the ability to demonstrate academic excellence alongside moral credibility and Islamic identity. These communication capacities increasingly shape institutional legitimacy, reputation, and long-term competitiveness (Nemaramba et al., 2024; Rosyida et al., 2025). In this context, competitiveness extends beyond student recruitment and rankings to include social legitimacy, trusted partnerships, service innovation, and responsiveness to technological and societal change (Nasir & Sutiah, 2025; Rachman et al., 2025).

Public relations has consequently developed from a technical publicity function into a strategic management and governance capability connecting institutional policies, organizational units, leaders, and stakeholders. Strategic public relations supports relationship building, stakeholder participation, reputation management, and communication-informed decision-making (SR & Ranganathan, 2025; Muhaeminah & Munawwaroh, 2025). Relationship management theory similarly emphasizes trust, commitment, satisfaction, mutuality, and shared understanding as foundations of organizational success (Wahyudin et al., 2025; Kim & Meganck, 2025). Public relations governance operationalizes these principles by coordinating communication policies, institutional messages, stakeholder engagement, responsibilities, and evaluation procedures (Lim et al., 2025; Wulandari et al., 2025).

Such governance is essential because universities communicate through multiple academic and administrative units that may produce inconsistent messages, delayed responses, fragmented digital communication, and unclear accountability. These problems are particularly consequential for Islamic universities, whose communication must integrate academic performance, religious identity, ethical commitments, community responsibilities, and institutional transparency. Emphasizing religious identity without demonstrating service quality, innovation, and accountability is insufficient, while communicating academic achievements without reflecting Islamic values may weaken moral legitimacy.

Leadership communication provides strategic direction within this governance structure by articulating institutional vision, interpreting organizational values, coordinating units, managing change, and developing stakeholder commitment (Musthofa et al., 2026; Muallidin, 2026). Organizational communication supports these functions through coordination, knowledge sharing, decision-making, and collaboration (Deng et al., 2023; Duan et al., 2024). Integrated communication promotes adaptability and stakeholder trust, whereas fragmentation creates conflicting messages and weakens public confidence (Danylenko & Zagorodsky, 2025; Eze & Zacky-Eze, 2025). Thus, organizational communication circulates information, leadership communication supplies direction, and public relations governance provides accountability and coordination.

Institutional reputation emerges from stakeholders' cumulative evaluations of academic quality, governance, service, communication credibility, social contribution, and organizational conduct. It depends on consistency between institutional claims and stakeholder experiences rather than promotional visibility alone. A favorable reputation strengthens trust, student interest, partnerships, and institutional support, whereas reputational weakness reduces attractiveness and legitimacy (Santa Soriano et al., 2023; Ruibley, 2024). Reputation and competitiveness are therefore interconnected outcomes of communication governance, leadership credibility, institutional performance, and stakeholder relationships.

Despite their complementarity, previous studies generally examine strategic public relations, relationship management, leadership communication, organizational communication, reputation, and competitiveness separately. Three gaps remain. Theoretically, the mechanisms through which public relations governance and leadership communication jointly influence stakeholder engagement, reputation, and competitiveness are insufficiently explained. Empirically, limited comparative evidence shows how these dimensions interact in everyday university governance. Contextually, Islamic higher education remains underexamined despite its distinctive need to integrate academic objectives, professional governance, religious identity, and moral legitimacy.

This study addresses these gaps through a comparative examination of Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember and Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. The former represents a state Islamic university with a formal public-sector governance structure, while the latter represents a private Muhammadiyah university with a community-based institutional tradition. Their contrasting governance arrangements and shared Islamic orientation enable the identification of common communication mechanisms and context-specific practices.

Accordingly, the study examines how public relations governance and leadership communication interact with stakeholder engagement to strengthen institutional reputation and competitiveness. It identifies the governance structures and communication practices operating at both institutions, explains how they generate trust and legitimacy, and develops the Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS). Theoretically, CRCS integrates public

relations governance, leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, reputation, and competitiveness into a governance-based framework. Empirically, the study provides cross-site evidence from two Islamic higher education settings. Practically, it offers university leaders and public relations practitioners a framework for coordinating communication, strengthening stakeholder participation, maintaining credible institutional narratives, and converting reputation into sustainable competitiveness.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multisite case study to examine how public relations governance and leadership communication interact with stakeholder engagement in strengthening the reputation and competitiveness of Islamic higher education institutions (Ali et al., 2026; Rachman et al., 2025). Multisite analysis enables comparison of patterns, institutional differences, and contextual mechanisms (Bustami et al., 2026; Guo & Li, 2025). The cases were purposively selected through maximum variation. UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember represents a state Islamic university with formal public-sector governance, whereas Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember represents a private, community-based Islamic university. Their contrasting structures and shared Islamic orientation supported cross-site comparison.

Data were collected from August to December 2025 from 30 purposively selected informants, with 15 participants at each institution. Inclusion required direct experience with institutional communication, leadership, public relations, stakeholder relations, or reputation building; at least one year of institutional involvement; and informed consent. Saturation was assessed within and across cases and was reached when successive interviews generated no new codes, categories, or relationships.

Table 1. Distribution of Research Participants

Participant category	UIN KHAS Jember	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	Total
University or faculty leaders	2	2	4
Director or head of public relations	1	1	2
Public relations and communication officers	2	2	4
Digital media managers	1	1	2
Lecturers	2	2	4
Administrative staff	2	2	4
Students	2	2	4
Alumni	1	1	2
External stakeholders	2	2	4
Total	15	15	30

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, moderate participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews examined governance, leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, reputation, and competitiveness. They lasted 45–75 minutes, were conducted face-to-face or online, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Observations covered meetings, organizational coordination, public communication, digital media,

stakeholder programs, and institutional events. Strategic plans, policies, organizational structures, reports, agreements, websites, social media, media publications, and evaluation documents were analyzed to corroborate interview and observational evidence.

Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently through data condensation, display, and conclusion verification. Transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded manually using Microsoft Excel. Open codes were connected through axial coding and developed into categories and higher-order themes through continuous comparison (Dias et al., 2026; Adaba, 2026). Within-case analysis was followed by cross-site comparison to identify convergent patterns, institutional differences, and context-specific practices (Wulandari et al., 2025; Reitsma & Haug, 2026). The relationships among governance, leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, reputation, and competitiveness were then synthesized into the Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS), maintaining a traceable progression from evidence to conceptual modeling (Bowden et al., 2026; Thiesmeier et al., 2025).

Trustworthiness was supported through source and methodological triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, an audit trail, and reflexive notes. Interview accounts were compared across stakeholder groups and against observational and documentary evidence. Preliminary interpretations were returned to selected participants, while two academic colleagues reviewed the codebook, themes, cross-site matrices, and CRCS model. These procedures strengthened credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Institutional permission and informed consent were obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw without consequences. Personal information was replaced with participant codes, while recordings, transcripts, and analytical files were stored in password-protected storage accessible only to the research team. Quotations were reported without revealing participant identities or confidential institutional information, and the data were used exclusively for research and academic publication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Analysis of interviews, observations, and institutional documents generated five interrelated themes: public relations governance, leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, institutional reputation, and competitiveness. Within-case analysis identified different governance patterns, while cross-site analysis revealed a common mechanism connecting these themes.

Public Relations Governance in Islamic Higher Education

Public relations at both institutions functioned as a governance mechanism coordinating organizational information, institutional messages, digital communication, public services, media relations, and stakeholder engagement. UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember employed a formal and centralized model that emphasized institutional consistency, as reflected in the statement: "Every faculty and unit is encouraged to coordinate information through the public

relations office so that institutional messages remain consistent and aligned with university policies." Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember applied a more adaptive and participatory model emphasizing community feedback and responsiveness. Despite these differences, both models connected institutional decision-making with stakeholder communication.

Table 2. Public Relations Governance in Islamic Higher Education

Governance dimension	UIN KHAS Jember	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember	Analytical Contribution
Communication governance	Formal and centralized	Adaptive and participatory	Aligns communication with institutional objectives
Public information	Structured institutional channels	Responsive public services	Strengthens transparency and trust
Digital communication	Centralized message management	Interactive feedback management	Supports visibility and stakeholder monitoring
Stakeholder engagement	Formal partnerships	Community-oriented participation	Develops legitimacy
Media relations	Coordinated institutional publications	Accessible public communication	Connects performance with reputation

Leadership Communication in Strengthening Institutional Reputation

Leadership communication provided strategic direction for public relations governance. At UIN KHAS Jember, leaders relied primarily on formal meetings and hierarchical coordination, whereas Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember emphasized openness and direct stakeholder engagement. In both institutions, leaders strengthened organizational alignment by communicating institutional vision, coordinating implementation, representing the university publicly, and ensuring consistency between policies, public messages, and institutional practices.

Table 3. Leadership Communication Practices

Communication Aspect	Empirical Evidence	Interpretative Insight	Reputational Outcome
Vision communication	Consistent communication of institutional objectives	Creates shared direction	Clear institutional identity
Internal communication	Cross-unit coordination	Aligns policies and implementation	Organizational coherence
Stakeholder communication	Engagement with internal and external groups	Increases accessibility	Trust and commitment
Public communication	Leadership representation in public forums	Communicates credibility and values	Institutional legitimacy
Strategic communication	Alignment between leadership and public relations	Integrates decisions and communication	Reputation enhancement

Institutional Reputation Strengthening Mechanisms

Institutional reputation emerged cumulatively from communication accuracy, academic performance, service responsiveness, leadership credibility, and stakeholder relationships. Public relations made academic achievements, accreditation, research, partnerships, and community service visible, while leadership communication explained their strategic significance. A communication officer summarized this mechanism: "Reputation grows when stakeholders consistently receive accurate information and observe tangible institutional performance." Digital exposure alone produced visibility; reputation developed when communicated claims corresponded with observable performance and stakeholder experience.

Table 4. Institutional Reputation Strengthening Mechanisms

Reputation component	Evidence	Analytical mechanism	Institutional impact
Academic reputation	Accreditation, research, and academic achievements	Performance validates institutional claims	Increased credibility
Institutional visibility	Websites, social media, and media publications	Credible exposure increases recognition	Public accessibility
Public trust	Accurate and responsive communication	Consistency reduces uncertainty	Stakeholder confidence
Stakeholder relationships	Partnerships, alumni, and community engagement	Reciprocal interaction builds commitment	Institutional legitimacy
Brand identity	Consistent communication of values and achievements	Coherent narratives establish distinctiveness	Sustainable positioning

Public Relations Governance and Competitiveness of Islamic Higher Education

Communication governance contributed to competitiveness indirectly through reputation, trust, visibility, and institutional relationships. Participants associated competitiveness with attracting students, expanding partnerships, maintaining stakeholder confidence, and establishing institutional distinctiveness. A senior manager stated: "Partnerships with government agencies, industries, and community organizations are easier to establish when institutional communication is managed professionally." Communication therefore created competitive value when it made credible performance visible and reduced uncertainty among prospective students, partners, and communities.

Table 5. Contributions of Public Relations Governance to Institutional Competitiveness

Competitiveness Dimension	Empirical Findings	Conversion Mechanism	Strategic Outcome
Reputation enhancement	Continuous communication of achievements	Connects performance with awareness	Competitive advantage
Public trust	Transparent and responsive information	Reduces stakeholder uncertainty	Legitimacy and support
Partnership development	Communication with government, industry, and communities	Facilitates relational continuity	Network expansion
Digital visibility	Active websites and social media	Increases discoverability	Wider exposure

Institutional positioning	Communication of distinctive programs and values	Clarifies institutional relevance	Stronger market position
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Cross-Site Synthesis: Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS)

Cross-site analysis showed that formal coordination at UIN KHAS Jember and adaptive participation at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember represented different pathways toward comparable reputational outcomes. Raw evidence concerning coordination, leadership meetings, digital communication, stakeholder feedback, institutional performance, and partnerships generated codes related to consistency, alignment, responsiveness, transparency, trust, visibility, and network expansion. These codes were consolidated into five categories: governance infrastructure, leadership alignment, stakeholder engagement, reputational formation, and competitive conversion.

The synthesis indicates that reputation is collectively produced rather than controlled exclusively by public relations. As one senior administrator stated, "Institutional reputation is built collectively. Public relations, leadership, academic units, students, alumni, and external partners all contribute to how the university is perceived." Public relations governance coordinates communication infrastructure; leadership communication aligns strategic direction; stakeholder engagement generates trust and legitimacy; reputation emerges from consistency between communication and performance; and competitiveness develops through visibility, partnerships, and stakeholder support. Feedback from stakeholders and reputational outcomes continuously inform governance and leadership priorities.

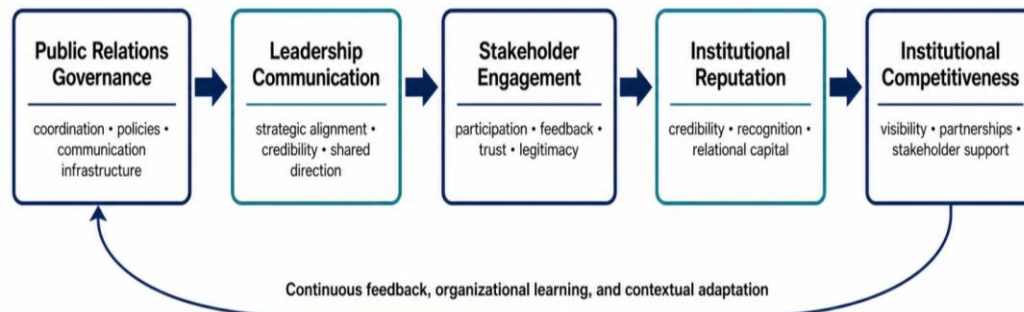


Figure 1. Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS)

Figure 1 presents CRCS as an iterative communication ecosystem. Public relations governance, leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, institutional reputation, and competitiveness reinforce one another through continuous feedback, organizational learning, and contextual adaptation. Thus, the two institutions used different governance configurations but achieved comparable outcomes when communication coordination, leadership credibility, stakeholder participation, and institutional performance operated coherently.

Discussion

The findings reposition public relations as a governance capability rather than a technical publicity function. By coordinating communication authority, institutional messages, digital channels, stakeholder feedback, and organizational

responses, public relations governance reduces inconsistencies between policies, practices, and external communication. This extends Ruihley's (2024) conception of public relations as a management function and supports studies linking strategic communication governance with organizational adaptability and resilience (Abidin et al., 2024; Anggarina et al., 2024; Nemaramba et al., 2024). Nevertheless, greater publication frequency or digital exposure did not automatically produce trust; reputational value depended on coordination, accuracy, responsiveness, and consistency with observable institutional performance.

Leadership communication activated this infrastructure by translating institutional priorities into shared meaning. Internally, it reduced uncertainty and aligned academic, administrative, and public relations units; externally, leaders represented institutional credibility when their messages corresponded with organizational conduct. This supports research connecting leadership effectiveness with communication competence, stakeholder engagement, trust, and organizational sensemaking (Muallidin, 2026; Lee & Sanyang, 2026). Reputation consequently emerged not from promotion alone but from stakeholders' cumulative evaluation of academic achievements, accreditation, research, community service, partnerships, communication credibility, and direct experience. This confirms reputation as a strategic intangible asset (Stoica et al., 2025; Rajagukguk et al., 2023), while showing that communication converts performance into reputational capital only when visibility and credibility reinforce each other.

Stakeholder engagement connected governance and leadership communication with trust and legitimacy. Dialogue, community programs, alum relations, and partnerships allowed stakeholders to provide feedback and participate in institutional meaning-making, consistent with evidence that engagement strengthens legitimacy, resilience, and sustainable development (Lee & Sanyang, 2026; Mickeleit et al., 2025). However, consultation generated relational value only when followed by institutional response. This mechanism is especially important in Islamic higher education, where reputation reflects not only academic quality and efficiency but also religious identity, ethical credibility, social responsibility, and community service. Communication governance must therefore integrate professional performance with Islamic values, enabling stakeholder engagement to support both competitiveness and institutional mission.

Cross-site comparison shows that no single governance configuration is inherently superior. UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember's formal and hierarchical model supported consistency and accountability but risked slower responsiveness. In contrast, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember's adaptive and participatory model strengthened accessibility but required coordination to prevent fragmented messages. Both generated positive outcomes when aligned with leadership practices, stakeholder needs, and institutional values, supporting the proposition that different configurations can be effective when contextually appropriate (Rachman et al., 2025; Wulandari et al., 2025). Competitiveness arose when credible communication transformed reputation and relationships into

student interest, partnerships, recognition, and stakeholder support. Reputation, legitimacy, and communication capability thus operated as difficult-to-replicate intangible resources (Stoica et al., 2025; Rajagukguk et al., 2023), although communication amplified rather than replaced academic quality, service performance, financial capacity, and other institutional resources.

The Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS) integrates these mechanisms: public relations governance provides infrastructure, leadership communication supplies direction and credibility, stakeholder engagement generates trust and legitimacy, reputation emerges from alignment between communication and performance, and competitiveness develops through visibility, partnerships, and support. Feedback loops make the model reciprocal rather than linear, extending approaches that regard communication as constitutive of organizational life (Abidin et al., 2024; Wulandari et al., 2025). CRCS integrates previously separated constructs, explains their operating mechanisms, and accommodates different organizational configurations. However, because it derives from two qualitative cases, it neither establishes causality nor quantifies the relative influence of each component; it therefore remains an empirically grounded framework requiring validation across other institutional and national contexts.

Practically, universities should establish cross-unit communication protocols, clarify responsibility for institutional messages, involve public relations personnel in strategic decisions, and ensure that communicated claims are supported by performance evidence. Leaders should maintain consistent internal communication and visible stakeholder engagement, while public relations units should use digital platforms for feedback monitoring and response rather than publication alone. Islamic universities should also connect academic achievements with ethical commitments, Islamic identity, and measurable community contributions. Overall, reputation and competitiveness arise from the continuing interaction of governance coordination, leadership credibility, stakeholder participation, institutional performance, and value-based identity; CRCS captures this interaction while emphasizing contextual fit, credible performance, and continuous organizational learning.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that public relations governance, leadership communication, and stakeholder engagement collectively strengthen institutional reputation and competitiveness in Islamic higher education. A cross-site analysis of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember and Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember shows that different governance approaches—formal and participatory—can achieve similar outcomes when communication aligns with institutional structures, stakeholder expectations, performance, and Islamic values. The study proposes the Collaborative Reputation Communication System (CRCS) as a strategic framework integrating communication governance, leadership, stakeholder engagement, reputation, and competitiveness. The findings highlight the need for universities to embed public relations in strategic decision-making, develop communication protocols, utilize digital feedback systems, and integrate

academic excellence with Islamic identity and social contribution. Future research should further validate CRCS across diverse institutional and international contexts.

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