

Preserving *Pesantren* Ethics in the Digital Age: Community Perceptions of Social Media Interaction

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ABSTRACT

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The increasing use of social media has created new opportunities and challenges for *pesantren* in maintaining institutional credibility, communicating religious values, and engaging with diverse audiences. Controversial content and inadequate crisis responses may negatively affect public perceptions and weaken trust in *pesantren* as religious educational institutions. This study examines the impact of controversial social media content on community perceptions and explores the ethical issues involved in social media crisis management at Pondok *Pesantren* Nurul Jadid. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and digital document analysis involving social media administrators, *pesantren* leaders, santri, parents, and members of the wider community. The findings identify five major impacts of controversial content: declining public trust, negative stereotyping, social polarization, increased institutional exposure, and broader public discussion of religious and educational issues. The study further reveals three major ethical challenges in crisis management: the tension between following social media trends and maintaining religious values, the need for ethical engagement with diverse audiences, and the lack of structured and adaptive crisis management strategies. The findings indicate that *pesantren* require a value-based and systematic approach to digital crisis management, including early crisis identification, the establishment of a dedicated crisis management team, rapid and appropriate responses, and continuous evaluation. The study contributes to the discussion of digital ethics and crisis communication in religious educational institutions by demonstrating that effective social media management requires a balance between institutional identity, religious values, public engagement, and the rapidly changing dynamics of digital communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has increasingly become an important communication environment for religious and educational institutions, including *pesantren*. Beyond functioning as a channel for disseminating information, social media provides *pesantren* with opportunities to strengthen their public image, communicate educational values, and establish broader relationships with surrounding communities. When managed appropriately, social media content that is ethically grounded and responsive to contemporary digital trends can enable *pesantren* to construct narratives that are both engaging and educational (Rita Fitria, 2024; Terttiaavini & Saputra, 2022). However, the expansion of *pesantren* communication into digital spaces also creates new ethical challenges. The rapid circulation of information, the visibility of online content, and the participatory nature of social media can expose *pesantren* to reputational risks when published content is perceived as inappropriate, misleading,

insensitive, or inconsistent with religious and social norms. Several viral cases involving inappropriate visual or narrative content illustrate how digital communication can generate public controversy and negatively affect institutional image. Consequently, communities increasingly expect *pesantren* to exercise greater caution and ethical responsibility in producing and disseminating social media content (Rahmawati et al., 2023).

The issue of ethical legitimacy in digital interaction is therefore particularly relevant to the contemporary development of *pesantren*. Previous studies have examined various dimensions of digital interaction and its implications for religious and educational institutions. Nurhadi et al. (2022) identify two principal purposes of communicating ethical messages through social media: maintaining students' ethical behavior in accordance with the values derived from the Qur'an and Hadith, and counteracting negative influences that frequently emerge in digital environments. At the individual level, students' experiences with social media involve both risks and opportunities. Negative experiences include exposure to cyberbullying and vulnerability to misinformation or hoaxes, whereas positive experiences include rapid and convenient access to information. These contrasting experiences demonstrate that social media constitutes both an educational opportunity and an ethical challenge within the *pesantren* context.

The broader literature also demonstrates that ethical concerns are inherent in digital communication. Massey (n.d.) argues that although the use of fictional storytelling on social media for educational purposes may provide greater benefits than risks, ethical concerns related to persuasion, manipulation, and potential deception remain significant and require transparency and trust to prevent ethical violations. Similarly, Singhal et al. (2024) demonstrate that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning in disseminating information through social media raises a range of ethical challenges, emphasizing the importance of fairness, accountability, transparency, and ethics (FATE) in ensuring responsible implementation. Ausat (2023) further highlights the significant role of social media in shaping public opinion and influencing economic decision-making through interaction, information sharing, and participation in public discussions. These processes contribute to the formation of collective perceptions of various issues. In a related context, MacKay et al. (2021) show that effective crisis communication principles are applied inconsistently by public health and news media, contributing to negative public sentiment. Their findings underline the importance of consistent and credible communication practices for building public trust and fostering positive public perceptions.

Although these studies provide important insights into digital ethics, social media communication, public opinion, and institutional reputation, there remains a need to examine how ethical values rooted in *pesantren* culture are perceived when they are communicated through social media. The central issue is not merely whether *pesantren* use social media, but how the ethical appropriateness of their digital content is interpreted by the community. This is particularly important because public perceptions of *pesantren* are shaped not only by their educational and religious activities but also by their visibility and representation in digital spaces. Content that is perceived as consistent with religious values and prevailing social norms may strengthen institutional credibility, whereas controversial or ethically questionable content may produce negative perceptions and undermine public trust.

This study therefore focuses on community perceptions of *pesantren* ethics in social media interaction. It examines how the community evaluates *pesantren* social media content in relation to religious values, social norms, and institutional reputation. The study also considers how controversial content may influence public perceptions and identifies the importance of ethically grounded social media crisis management in maintaining community trust. By examining these dimensions, this study seeks to contribute to the discussion of digital ethics in Islamic education by

positioning community perception as an important indicator of the social legitimacy of *pesantren* communication in digital environments.

The study argues that the ethical legitimacy of *pesantren*'s digital interactions has a significant relationship with community perceptions. *Pesantren* that present relevant, responsible, and ethically grounded content that reflects their religious and moral values are more likely to receive greater community trust and support. Conversely, controversial or ethically inappropriate content may generate negative perceptions, weaken institutional image, and undermine the relationship between *pesantren* and their communities. Accordingly, ethical social media management should be regarded not simply as a communication strategy but as an integral component of maintaining institutional credibility and social trust in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore social media crisis management in the *pesantren* context, with a particular focus on *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid*. The *pesantren* was purposively selected because of its significant social media activities and experience in dealing with digital issues and crises. The participants included social media administrators, *pesantren* leaders, santri, parents, and members of the wider community who interacted with the *pesantren*'s social media accounts. The inclusion of these diverse groups was intended to capture different perspectives on social media communication, crisis management, ethical considerations, and community responses to digital content.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, observation, and digital document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding social media management, responses to controversial issues, and ethical considerations in digital communication. Observation was conducted using an observation sheet to examine social media activities, including content publication, audience interactions, and institutional responses to emerging issues. Digital documents, including social media posts, comments, and responses to crisis-related issues, were also analyzed to provide contextual evidence regarding the communication practices of the *pesantren*. The combination of these techniques enabled the researchers to examine the phenomenon from multiple sources and perspectives.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns and themes related to social media crisis management, ethical communication, institutional responses, audience perceptions, and institutional credibility. The analysis involved organizing relevant information from interviews, observations, and digital documents, followed by cross-source comparison to identify converging and diverging findings. Data triangulation was employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by comparing information obtained from different participant groups with observational and documentary evidence. The research process consisted of preparation and preliminary exploration, data collection, thematic analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the findings into theoretical and practical implications for ethical social media crisis management in *pesantren*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Community Understanding of the Ethics of *Pesantren* Content on Social Media

Social media has become a strategic platform for building institutional image and expanding the networks of educational institutions, including *pesantren*. *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid*, as an institution that has adopted digital technology, actively utilizes social media to disseminate information, religious outreach (*dakwah*), and promotional content related to its activities (Ritala et

al., 2021). However, the use of social media is not without ethical challenges, particularly in maintaining the religious values inherent in the *pesantren* tradition. Community understanding of the content published by *pesantren* plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of social media in constructing a positive institutional image.

The findings indicate that community perceptions of the ethics of *pesantren* content on social media are influenced by three main factors. The first is the relevance of content to religious values. This represents a primary consideration for the community when evaluating *pesantren* content on social media. *Pesantren* are perceived as institutions responsible for preserving Islamic values, which should be reflected in every publication in terms of its content, language, and purpose (Izzulloh & Moebin, 2022). An interview with a local community member revealed: *"Pesantren should focus on content that provides religious enlightenment or education. If they follow trends too much, they may lose their essence as a religious institution"* (AD). Meanwhile, a *pesantren* media administrator explained: *"We try to balance religious outreach with attracting the audience's attention through relatable content"* (NV). Previous research indicates that although social media provides opportunities for positive activities such as religious outreach and education, it must be used responsibly and ethically in accordance with Islamic principles so that it does not become a means of disseminating falsehood, slander, or hate speech that may harm individuals and society (Abdillah, 2021). This finding is relevant because the alignment between *pesantren* content on social media and religious values and social norms is essential for shaping positive community perceptions. Furthermore, responsible and ethical social media management can strengthen the position of *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid* as a relevant and trustworthy educational institution in modern society. Therefore, *pesantren* need to implement appropriate mechanisms to ensure that every published piece of content reflects sound religious values.

The second factor is the alignment of visual and narrative elements with social norms. The visual presentation and narrative of social media content play an important role in shaping community perceptions. The community expects visual content to be simple and consistent with prevailing standards of modesty and propriety (Masur et al., 2021). Narratives that are overly provocative or use excessively informal language are often perceived as inconsistent with the identity of a *pesantren*. One student stated: *"Pesantren posts should be simple and not too crowded. If there are too many visual effects, they can distract from the essence of the message"* (MD). Similarly, a member of the general public commented: *"Sometimes I feel that the narratives in the captions are too casual, so they do not reflect the identity of a religious institution"* (NS). The importance of conformity with social norms is further demonstrated by research showing that the use of language that does not comply with social norms on social media can contribute to harmful forms of online communication, including hoaxes, hate speech, and cyberbullying, which negatively affect language ethics on social media (Aulia et al., 2023). These findings demonstrate that the alignment of visual and narrative elements with social norms is important for *pesantren* in maintaining their institutional image and credibility. Therefore, *pesantren* should exercise caution in selecting the language and visual elements used on social media by considering prevailing social norms and religious ethical principles.

The third factor is *pesantren* engagement in responding to digital interactions. The community tends to appreciate educational and inspirational content while criticizing content that is considered controversial or potentially open to misinterpretation. Digital interactions, including responses to comments and direct messages, significantly influence community perceptions. *Pesantren* that actively respond to their audiences are perceived as more inclusive and attentive to their communities (Kholifah, 2022). Conversely, limited responses to public criticism or questions may create an impression of exclusivity or lack of transparency. One community member stated: *"When I ask questions through direct messages, I rarely receive a response. I actually want to know more about*

the activities of the pesantren” (OP). A *pesantren* social media administrator explained: “*Limited time and human resources are often the reasons why we cannot respond to every incoming message*” (PO). This study further indicates that responsive digital interaction not only contributes to building trust but also strengthens the social ethical legitimacy of *pesantren* as inclusive institutions. This is consistent with research indicating that the transformation of *pesantren* in the Industry 4.0 era involves technological adaptation in education, infrastructure challenges, and opportunities to expand access to information and curriculum development through broader digital interaction (Ridwan Maulana Rifqi Muzakky et al., 2023). Previous research also emphasizes the importance of active *pesantren* engagement with digital platforms in strengthening transparency and public trust. Conversely, limited responses to criticism or questions may create perceptions of exclusivity and insufficient transparency, potentially weakening the social ethical legitimacy of *pesantren*.

Overall, community understanding of the ethics of *pesantren* content on social media, particularly at *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid*, is influenced by the extent to which published content is consistent with religious values and social norms. Educational content that reflects Islamic values tends to receive positive appreciation, whereas content that excessively follows viral trends is more likely to be criticized because it is perceived as inadequately representing the identity of *pesantren* as religious institutions. The interview findings and analysis further reveal a gap between community expectations regarding content ethics and the approaches adopted by the *pesantren* in producing digital materials. Simple visual presentations and language that conforms to social norms are more highly valued, while the *pesantren*'s responsiveness to comments and criticism on social media also influences community perceptions of the authenticity of its ethical values. Ethical social media management is therefore essential for the *pesantren* to maintain a positive institutional image and strengthen public trust.

The Impact of Controversial Content on Community Perceptions of *Pesantren*

Social media provides *pesantren* with significant opportunities to build a positive institutional image and strengthen interaction with the community (Husnah, 2024). However, the presence of controversial content represents a significant challenge that can influence community perceptions of *pesantren*. This challenge becomes increasingly relevant as *pesantren* navigate their role in digital spaces while maintaining their traditional identity as religious educational institutions.

This study identified five major impacts of controversial content on community perceptions of *pesantren*. First, declining public trust. Controversial content often creates negative perceptions that directly affect the level of public trust in *pesantren*. This is particularly evident when such content contradicts ethical values or social norms considered appropriate by the community. An interview participant stated, “*When I see controversial content from a pesantren, I immediately think, how could a pesantren be like that? In our society, pesantren should be role models. If there is even one negative issue, the impact can be significant, especially on social media where information spreads rapidly*” (HA). Ardiansyah and Basuki (2023) explain that the implementation of social piety values can serve as an effective strategy for *pesantren* in responding to the challenges of the Society 5.0 era by preparing young people who are competent in religious knowledge, science, and technology. The decline in public trust indicates a reputational crisis that may have long-term consequences. This finding highlights the need for more careful institutional image management when dealing with social media challenges.

Second, negative stereotyping. Controversial content can reinforce negative stereotypes about *pesantren*, including perceptions that *pesantren* are incompatible with modern society or remain trapped in narrow forms of traditionalism. One participant stated, “*There is content portraying pesantren activities negatively, such as the use of inappropriate physical punishment. Although it*

may involve only one *pesantren*, it can create negative stereotypes about all *pesantren*” (JI). Castaño-Pulgarín et al. (2021) demonstrate that online hate speech (*cyberhate*) on the Internet and social media involves the use of aggressive, abusive, or offensive language toward particular groups. In the context of *pesantren*, negative stereotyping can become a significant obstacle to attracting younger generations. Nevertheless, it also creates an opportunity for *pesantren* to reconstruct more inclusive and adaptive narratives through social media.

Third, social polarization. Controversial content can divide public opinion into opposing groups, including those who support and those who criticize *pesantren*. One participant explained, “*I feel very confused by all the content circulating. Some people view pesantren as educational institutions full of positive values, while others feel that pesantren only teach things that are no longer relevant. This polarization makes people uncertain about which position to support*” (GH). Budiman (2021) demonstrates that populism in Indonesia has dual effects: on the one hand, it can effectively increase the popularity of political actors and mobilize support; on the other hand, it can trigger social polarization, weaken awareness of unity, and increase the potential for conflict, even after electoral periods have ended. In the *pesantren* context, polarization therefore creates challenges for managing public opinion. However, active engagement in such discussions can also provide opportunities for constructive dialogue when appropriately managed. *Pesantren* need to develop strategies to reduce polarization by presenting educational content that promotes social harmony.

Fourth, increased exposure to *pesantren*. Although controversial content may generate negative consequences, it can also increase public exposure to *pesantren* by attracting the attention of individuals who were previously less engaged with them. A young participant stated, “*As a young person who is active on social media, I see how controversial content can make pesantren more widely known. Although it may initially happen in an inappropriate way, it creates a significant opportunity for pesantren to introduce their actual vision and mission*” (OP). Saini (2024) discusses the dynamics of *pesantren* in the digital era, particularly their efforts to remain relevant to contemporary developments through digital transformation without abandoning their traditional identity. Increased exposure can therefore provide *pesantren* with opportunities to expand their audience. However, such exposure needs to be accompanied by positive and constructive narratives to prevent long-term damage to institutional image.

Fifth, public discussion of religious and educational issues. Controversial content can stimulate broader public discussions regarding the role of *pesantren* in religious and educational issues, both in digital and offline environments. One participant stated, “*Controversial content can certainly generate a lot of discussion, both online and offline. I see this as an opportunity for pesantren to introduce new programs and innovations that we have developed. However, the challenge is how we can direct the discussion in a positive direction that remains consistent with the values we uphold*” (UY). Febriani and Desrani (2021) argue that social media significantly influences patterns of thinking and behavior in the process of deepening religious learning. Such discussions reflect the high level of public attention toward *pesantren*, which can be utilized to introduce new programs and innovations. Nevertheless, *pesantren* must be able to guide these discussions toward constructive outcomes that remain consistent with positive institutional values.

Ethical Issues in Social Media Crisis Management in *Pesantren*

Ethical issues represent a major concern in the management of social media by *pesantren*, particularly when institutions face crises that may affect their public image (Rahmatullah, 2021). As religious educational institutions characterized by strong traditional values, *pesantren* frequently face the challenge of reconciling religiously grounded ethics with the dynamics of digital communication. Inappropriate crisis management, such as defensive responses, may generate public doubt regarding

the integrity of the institution. Therefore, examining how *pesantren* manage ethical issues during social media crises is important for understanding how public trust can be maintained while strengthening institutional credibility.

The observations identified several major ethical issues. First, the dilemma between social media trends and *pesantren* religious values. *Pesantren* frequently face pressure to follow social media trends in order to reach broader audiences, particularly younger generations (Istiqomah Nurul Azizah et al., 2024). However, such efforts may conflict with the religious values that constitute the core of *pesantren* identity. One social media administrator at *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid* explained: “*We want to attract young people's attention, but sometimes the trends that attract the most attention conflict with the Islamic principles that we uphold*” (IP).

Second, ethical audience engagement. Responding to audiences on social media requires *pesantren* to consider the diverse characteristics of their audiences (Sunu Setiawan Utama et al., 2024). The *pesantren* recognizes that its audiences include santri, alumni, parents, and members of the general public. Consequently, its communication approach is not limited to information dissemination but also seeks to establish positive relationships with audiences through communication practices consistent with *pesantren* ethics. One social media administrator at *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid* stated: “*We try to respond to our audiences appropriately because we realize that our audience is very diverse. There are alumni, parents of students, and even members of the public who may simply want to learn more about the pesantren. We try to align our communication with them to build good relationships while maintaining the ethical standards established by the pesantren*” (PO).

Third, suboptimal crisis management. In responding to social media crises, including negative comments, controversial content, or the dissemination of information that may harm the *pesantren*, crisis management at *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid* has not yet been fully optimized. The absence of a well-planned crisis communication strategy can result in slow and ineffective responses, thereby worsening public perceptions (Tania & Cahyono, 2022). The study also identified limited human resources with the technical and strategic expertise required for social media crisis management. In dealing with digital crises such as negative comments or controversial content, the rapid changes in social media trends can also make existing plans less relevant. One participant explained: “*We actually already have an idea of the steps to take if a problem occurs, but because social media is constantly changing, we have to keep adapting quickly*” (RE).

Social media crisis management in *pesantren* therefore requires a structured and responsive approach. The first step is crisis identification. *Pesantren* social media administrators should regularly monitor various social media platforms to detect issues that have the potential to develop into crises (Saputri et al., 2021). By using monitoring tools such as Google Alerts or manually monitoring platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, *pesantren* can identify negative or controversial comments and discussions at an early stage. For example, if a comment concerning a *pesantren* policy is poorly understood or rejected by members of the community, administrators can immediately identify it as an issue requiring a response.

After identifying a crisis, the next step is to establish a crisis management team. This team should consist of social media administrators, communication specialists, and *pesantren* leaders who are responsible for addressing the crisis efficiently and promptly (Guo et al., 2021). Each member should be assigned specific responsibilities, such as preparing clarification messages, communicating with relevant stakeholders, or monitoring audience reactions. An organized crisis team enables *pesantren* to respond in a coordinated manner and avoid rushed or inconsistent communication.

The next stage involves rapid and appropriate response. The social media team should promptly disseminate accurate information across relevant platforms to prevent misinformation from

spreading. Rapid responses are important for calming audiences and reducing tension (Putri & Abdulah, 2022). In addition, administrators should remain responsive to comments and questions and provide further clarification when necessary.

Finally, *pesantren* need to evaluate the entire crisis management process. Evaluation is intended to assess the effectiveness of the actions taken and identify areas requiring improvement in future crisis situations (Ma'sum, 2020). For example, the institution may assess whether clarification messages were appropriately received by audiences and whether particular aspects of the response could have been delivered more rapidly or effectively. The results of this evaluation can then be used to improve future crisis management protocols.

Overall, the findings indicate that social media crisis management in *pesantren* continues to face significant challenges, particularly in maintaining ethical communication consistent with religious values while responding to the rapidly changing dynamics of social media. The findings highlight the dilemma between following popular trends to attract younger audiences and maintaining Islamic principles, as experienced by the social media administrators of *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid*. In addition, efforts to engage with diverse audiences demonstrate a commitment to building positive relationships, although these efforts are frequently constrained by limited strategic resources for crisis management. Suboptimal crisis management, including the absence of structured and adaptable crisis strategies, can worsen public perceptions when *pesantren* face negative comments or controversial content. The literature reviewed in this study reinforces the importance of implementing structured measures, including crisis identification, crisis team formation, rapid response, and systematic evaluation, to protect *pesantren*'s institutional image and strengthen public trust in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that social media crisis management in *pesantren* faces significant challenges in reconciling religious values with the dynamics of digital communication. Key findings include the dilemma between following social media trends and maintaining Islamic principles, the management of diverse audiences to establish positive relationships, and the suboptimal implementation of crisis management strategies that can negatively affect *pesantren*'s institutional image. Current crisis management practices remain largely reactive and lack structured planning, resulting in responses that may be slow and insufficiently aligned with rapidly evolving situations.

This study contributes to the understanding of ethical social media management within religious educational institutions. By identifying ideal strategies such as establishing crisis management teams, providing rapid responses, and conducting systematic evaluations, the study contributes to the literature on crisis management in religious-based educational institutions. It also emphasizes the importance of a value-based approach to digital communication in maintaining a balance between institutional integrity and the need to reach broader audiences, particularly within an increasingly dynamic digital environment.

This study has several limitations. First, its focus is limited to a single *pesantren*, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized directly to other *pesantren* with different institutional characteristics and contexts. Second, the study does not extensively examine external factors such as social media regulations and the influence of competition among digital platforms, which may limit the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Future research should therefore expand the scope of investigation to multiple *pesantren* with diverse institutional backgrounds and employ interdisciplinary approaches to further examine the relationship between digital regulation, social media trends, and communication strategies in religious-based educational institutions.

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