

Digital Narratives of Pesantren Simplicity: Securing Institutional Sustainability Within Competitive Islamic Markets

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Abstract:

Digital communication increasingly determines how Islamic educational institutions establish legitimacy and sustain competitiveness within dynamic educational markets. This study examines how digital narratives of pesantren simplicity contribute to institutional sustainability through authentic communication and value-based organizational practices. A qualitative case study was conducted involving 12 purposively selected informants comprising institutional leaders, communication officers, teachers, students, alums, and parents using interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that consistent alignment between digital narratives and everyday educational practices strengthened stakeholder trust, sustained institutional resilience through value-oriented management, and transformed simplicity into a distinctive digital identity across multiple communication platforms. The study contributes by integrating digital narrative theory, institutional sustainability, and Islamic economics into a unified framework explaining value-based competitive advantage. Islamic educational institutions should develop authentic digital communication strategies that consistently reflect organizational values to enhance long-term sustainability and stakeholder engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication has fundamentally transformed how educational institutions build public legitimacy, attract stakeholders, and sustain themselves over the long term in increasingly competitive educational markets. This issue is particularly important because institutional sustainability now depends not only on educational quality but also on the ability to communicate organizational identity through digital platforms (Alan et al., 2022; Obrenovic et al., 2022; Sekar, 2022). Islamic



educational institutions, including pesantren, are increasingly expected to balance religious authenticity with modern communication strategies that appeal to prospective students, parents, donors, and wider communities. Evidence from the growing adoption of social media, digital branding, and online institutional campaigns demonstrates that digital narratives significantly influence stakeholder trust, enrollment decisions, and organizational reputation (Dy et al., 2022; Hilhorst et al., 2022).

Despite the increasing importance of digital communication, many pesantren continue to face significant challenges in positioning themselves within highly competitive Islamic education markets. The rapid emergence of integrated Islamic schools, modern boarding schools, and digitally sophisticated educational organizations has intensified competition for students, financial resources, philanthropic support, and institutional partnerships (Bhushan et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2023). In this environment, simplicity, a traditional characteristic associated with modesty, sincerity, and spiritual discipline, is often perceived as less economically attractive than modern facilities and technologically advanced educational services (Bilgiler et al., 2023; Budiharso et al., 2023). This phenomenon creates uncertainty about how traditional Islamic values can simultaneously serve as a cultural identity, branding assets, and strategic economic resources in contemporary educational competition.

Previous studies have extensively discussed digital branding, organizational identity, and institutional sustainability from various disciplinary perspectives. Hogg et al. (2023) and Chiappetta et al. (2020) argued that organizational identity is a strategic asset that influences stakeholder perceptions and competitive positioning. Stylos et al. (2021) and Mullins et al. (2020) emphasized that digital communication has become an essential instrument for value creation within service organizations. Yamagishi et al. (2024), Sari (2025), and Zaid et al. (2024) demonstrated that authentic brand narratives strengthen institutional trust and long-term loyalty, while Castells explained how digital networks reshape organizational legitimacy through continuous information exchange. Nevertheless, existing studies primarily focus on universities, commercial organizations, or general educational institutions (Basori et al., 2023; Mundzir, 2022; Sidik et al., 2024). Limited attention has been devoted to examining how pesantren transform traditional values of simplicity into digital narratives that can generate institutional sustainability in competitive Islamic educational markets.

The present study offers a novel perspective by conceptualizing pesantren simplicity not merely as a religious doctrine or an educational philosophy, but as a strategic intangible asset capable of generating institutional sustainability through the construction of digital narratives. Unlike previous studies that primarily investigate digital marketing effectiveness or organizational branding independently, this research integrates digital communication, Islamic institutional identity, and sustainability economics into a unified analytical framework (Emanuelsson et al., 2023; Falkheimer et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). The study proposes that narratives emphasizing sincerity, modest living, community service, and spiritual integrity can simultaneously reinforce religious legitimacy and create competitive differentiation within increasingly market-oriented Islamic education sectors. This perspective extends existing branding

literature by demonstrating that value-based communication may produce both symbolic legitimacy and measurable institutional advantages, thereby enriching interdisciplinary discussions connecting digital economy, educational management, and Islamic organizational studies (Maar et al., 2023; Prayogi et al., 2021).

Based on these theoretical and practical developments, several important research questions remain unanswered. First, how are narratives of pesantren simplicity strategically constructed and disseminated through digital communication platforms? Second, how do these narratives influence stakeholder perceptions regarding institutional credibility, educational quality, and long-term sustainability? Third, to what extent does digital communication transform traditional religious values into strategic economic resources capable of strengthening competitiveness within Islamic educational markets? Existing literature has not adequately explained the mechanisms by which value-centered narratives simultaneously contribute to organizational legitimacy, market differentiation, and institutional resilience. Addressing these questions is increasingly important because Islamic educational institutions operate within environments characterized by digital disruption, changing stakeholder expectations, and intensified competition for educational resources and public trust.

This study argues that digital narratives of pesantren simplicity function as strategic communication mechanisms that convert religious values into institutional capital capable of supporting sustainable competitive advantage. Rather than diminishing market competitiveness, narratives emphasizing simplicity, sincerity, discipline, and communal responsibility may strengthen stakeholder confidence by projecting authenticity, moral credibility, and organizational consistency. The originality of this research lies in integrating institutional sustainability, digital narrative theory, and Islamic economic perspectives to explain how non-material values generate tangible organizational outcomes within competitive educational markets. Accordingly, this study contributes theoretically by extending discussions on value-based digital branding and, practically, by providing strategic insights for pesantren administrators seeking to preserve religious authenticity while enhancing institutional resilience, stakeholder engagement, and long-term economic sustainability in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how digital narratives of pesantren simplicity contribute to institutional sustainability within competitive Islamic educational markets (Kohn et al., 2024). A qualitative approach was selected because the research seeks to understand the meanings, values, communication practices, and strategic interpretations embedded in digital narratives, rather than to measure causal relationships quantitatively. The case study design enables an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena within their real-life institutional context, allowing researchers to capture interactions between religious values, digital communication, and organizational sustainability. This approach is particularly appropriate because constructing institutional identity through digital media involves multiple perspectives, symbolic meanings, and contextual factors that cannot be adequately explained by statistical analysis alone.

The research was conducted at a well-established Islamic boarding school (pesantren) in Indonesia that has actively used digital platforms, including its official website and social media accounts, to communicate its institutional identity and educational values. The location was purposively selected because it demonstrates consistent digital communication activities while maintaining a strong institutional commitment to the traditional value of simplicity (kesederhanaan), making it an appropriate case for investigating the relationship between digital narratives and institutional sustainability. The study involved 12 informants selected through purposive sampling for their direct involvement in institutional communication and strategic decision-making. The informants consisted of one pesantren leader (kyai), two vice directors responsible for institutional management, two public relations officers, two digital media administrators, two teachers, one student organization leader, one alumnus actively involved in promotion, and one parent representative.

Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Kekeya, 2023). Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to explain their experiences and perspectives on constructing pesantren simplicity through digital media, while allowing flexibility to explore emerging issues. Participant observation was conducted to examine communication practices, institutional activities, and the integration of values of simplicity into everyday organizational life. Document analysis included institutional policy documents, strategic communication plans, promotional materials, official websites, Facebook pages, Instagram posts, YouTube content, and other digital publications that reflected the pesantren's public narratives. Employing multiple data sources facilitated a comprehensive understanding of both the intended institutional messages and their implementation across digital communication channels.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Salda (Cole, 2024). The analysis began with data condensation, in which interview transcripts, observation notes, and institutional documents were organized and coded by theme, including digital narratives, simplicity values, institutional identity, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability. The second stage involved data reduction, in which irrelevant information was eliminated, and meaningful categories were refined into broader conceptual themes. The third stage consisted of data display, using thematic matrices and narrative mapping to identify patterns, relationships, and recurring communication strategies across different sources of evidence. Finally, data verification and conclusion drawing were undertaken through continuous comparison among data sources, emerging themes, and theoretical concepts until coherent interpretations and consistent findings regarding the role of digital narratives in institutional sustainability were established.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied several qualitative validity procedures (Lee et al., 2024). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different categories of informants, while method triangulation combined interviews, observations, and document analysis to strengthen the consistency of interpretations. Member checking was performed by returning interview summaries and preliminary interpretations to selected participants for

confirmation and clarification. In addition, peer debriefing with fellow qualitative researchers was employed to minimize researcher bias and improve analytical rigor. An audit trail documenting data collection, coding decisions, analytical procedures, and interpretation processes was also maintained to enhance the study's transparency, dependability, and confirmability. These procedures ensured that the findings accurately represented participants' perspectives while providing credible explanations of how digital narratives of pesantren simplicity contribute to institutional sustainability within competitive Islamic educational markets.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings demonstrate that digital narratives of pesantren simplicity contribute to institutional sustainability through three interconnected dimensions: authentic communication, sustainable institutional practices, and value-based digital narratives. These dimensions collectively illustrate how traditional Islamic values are strategically transformed into organizational resources that strengthen stakeholder trust, reinforce institutional resilience, and enhance competitiveness within increasingly dynamic Islamic educational markets.

Strengthening Stakeholder Trust Through Authentic Communication

Stakeholder trust through authentic communication was operationally defined as the degree to which internal and external stakeholders perceived the pesantren as a credible, transparent, and value-driven institution, based on the consistency between its digital messages and its everyday educational practices. During fieldwork, trust emerged from participants' evaluations of how institutional communication reflected sincerity, simplicity, honesty, and social responsibility rather than promotional exaggeration. The operational indicators included perceived consistency between online narratives and offline experiences, confidence in institutional leadership, willingness to recommend the pesantren to others, and long-term commitment to institutional activities. The findings demonstrate that authentic communication functions not merely as an information-sharing mechanism but as an institutional asset that strengthens credibility and reinforces sustainable stakeholder relationships.

Interviews with institutional leaders and communication managers revealed that authentic communication was intentionally developed by maintaining consistency between institutional values and digital publications. The pesantren leader explained, "We never create content only to attract attention. Every message uploaded represents what our students genuinely experience every day." Similarly, the public relations coordinator stated, "Parents trust us because our digital communication reflects reality. We avoid excessive promotion and instead present daily educational activities exactly as they occur." These statements indicate that communication strategies were guided by institutional ethics rather than marketing objectives alone. The researcher interpreted that authenticity was deliberately positioned as the foundation of public communication, allowing stakeholders to perceive organizational transparency and integrity. Rather than emphasizing competitive superiority, institutional messages focused on honesty, thereby strengthening confidence among prospective students, parents, alums, and surrounding communities.

Perspectives from teachers, students, alums, and parents further confirmed that authentic communication significantly influenced stakeholder trust. One teacher stated, "Our educational values remain unchanged whether cameras are present or not. Digital content documents what already exists." A student organization leader similarly explained, "The activities shown on social media are exactly what we experience every day, so we feel proud when people recognize our identity." An alumnus added, "The online information reflects the pesantren I remember, which encourages me to recommend it confidently to prospective families." A parent representative remarked, "After visiting the campus, I found the environment identical to what had been presented online." The researcher interpreted these responses as evidence that stakeholders associated institutional credibility with consistency between digital representation and lived experience.

Field observations further reinforced the interview findings by demonstrating visible consistency between institutional communication and everyday educational practices. Daily learning activities, communal worship, student interactions, leadership engagement, and community service programs reflected the same values repeatedly presented across official communication channels. Researchers observed that digital documentation accurately represented modest facilities, disciplined routines, collaborative learning, and respectful interpersonal relationships, with no noticeable discrepancies between online presentations and field conditions. This consistency simplified stakeholder interpretation because institutional narratives were directly supported by observable practices rather than symbolic promotion alone. Overall, the findings reveal a clear pattern in which authentic communication generated trust through continuous alignment between organizational values, digital narratives, and daily institutional behavior.

Constructing Digital Narratives Through Pesantren Simplicity

Institutional sustainability within competitive Islamic educational markets was operationally defined as the pesantren's capacity to maintain organizational continuity, educational relevance, stakeholder engagement, and competitive attractiveness while preserving its traditional values of simplicity. Field observations indicated that sustainability was reflected not only in student enrollment but also in consistent educational activities, community participation, institutional partnerships, digital engagement, and economic initiatives that support operational continuity. Rather than relying solely on physical infrastructure or financial resources, sustainability was observed through the integration of religious values into institutional management and public interaction. These observable practices demonstrated that simplicity served as a strategic institutional characteristic that maintained organizational resilience amid increasing competition among Islamic educational institutions.

Table 1. Observation Results on Institutional Sustainability Practices

Observed Activities		Observation Indicators
Student admission services	admission	Transparent admission process, consistent information delivery, and active interaction with prospective parents
Daily learning activities		Disciplined classroom routines, active teacher participation, and student engagement

Community service programs	Regular religious outreach, public education activities, and social assistance programs
Digital communication practices	Continuous updating of official social media, educational content dissemination, and public responsiveness
Institutional economic activities	Productive business units supporting educational operations and student entrepreneurship
Leadership interaction	Direct communication between leaders, teachers, students, parents, and visitors
Campus environment	Simple facilities are maintained in clean, orderly, and functional conditions.
Religious and character-building activities	Collective prayers, Qur'an recitation, discipline, and communal responsibility are consistently implemented.

The observational findings demonstrate that institutional sustainability was evident in continuous organizational practices rather than in isolated promotional activities. Researchers observed that student admission services emphasized openness and personal interaction with prospective families, while educational activities consistently reflected disciplined learning environments. Community engagement remained active through religious outreach and social programs, strengthening institutional relationships beyond the campus. Digital communication complemented these activities by providing updated information without replacing direct stakeholder interaction. Institutional economic initiatives contributed additional operational support while maintaining educational priorities. These observations indicate that sustainability emerged from the continuous integration of educational quality, organizational management, community involvement, and religious values.

Overall, the observational data reveal a recurring pattern linking institutional sustainability with organizational consistency rather than material expansion. Educational programs, leadership practices, community engagement, economic initiatives, and digital communication collectively reinforced the pesantren's long-term resilience. The field observations further indicate that sustainability depended on maintaining alignment between institutional values and operational implementation across different organizational activities. Instead of pursuing aggressive market competition, the pesantren strengthened its position by demonstrating reliable educational services, transparent governance, active stakeholder engagement, and continuous value-based practices.

Enhancing Institutional Sustainability Within Islamic Educational Markets

Digital narratives of pesantren simplicity were operationally defined as the systematic representation of institutional values through official digital communication platforms, including websites, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, digital brochures, and other online publications. Rather than functioning solely as promotional media, these platforms were used to communicate simplicity as the pesantren's institutional identity. Field documentation demonstrated that digital content consistently portrayed modest learning environments, communal activities, religious discipline, student independence, and community service. The operational indicators included the consistency of visual identity, recurring value-based messages, the frequency of educational content, the representation of everyday activities, and the integration of

offline institutional practices with online communication. These indicators illustrate that digital narratives served as strategic instruments for presenting the pesantren's distinctive identity within increasingly competitive Islamic educational markets.

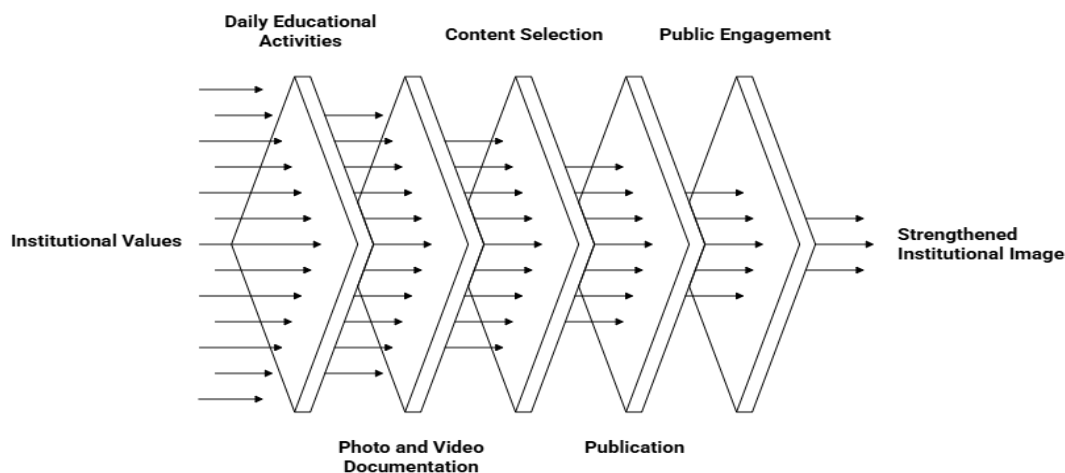


Figure 1. Flow of Digital Narrative Construction Based on Documentation

Observation of the institutional documentation showed that digital publications consistently emphasized authentic educational experiences rather than promotional claims. Images predominantly displayed students participating in religious learning, communal worship, classroom instruction, environmental maintenance, and community service. Visual content rarely highlights luxurious facilities; instead, it focuses on discipline, togetherness, modest living, and educational commitment. Researchers also observed that captions accompanying photographs consistently reinforced institutional values through messages encouraging sincerity, responsibility, and Islamic character development. Documentation published across different platforms maintained similar visual themes, language styles, and organizational identity. These findings indicate that digital communication was systematically organized to strengthen institutional identity while preserving the pesantren's traditional values within a contemporary digital communication environment.

The documented evidence demonstrates that the pesantren intentionally transformed everyday educational practices into coherent digital narratives representing its organizational identity. Restating these findings, institutional communication did not construct an artificial public image but documented actual educational activities that reflected simplicity in practice. The recurring documentation of modest facilities, disciplined routines, student collaboration, religious learning, and community engagement created a recognizable institutional narrative across multiple digital platforms. A clear pattern emerged: each published document reinforced the same organizational message, despite differences in communication channels. This consistency allowed digital audiences to associate the pesantren with authenticity, simplicity, and educational integrity, thereby strengthening institutional differentiation and enhancing public recognition within the increasingly competitive Islamic educational market.

Discussion

The findings indicate that authentic communication strengthens stakeholder trust because institutional messages consistently reflect actual educational practices rather than promotional exaggeration. This finding supports studies emphasizing that organizational authenticity enhances institutional legitimacy by reducing uncertainty among stakeholders. However, unlike previous studies that primarily examine authenticity within commercial branding, this research demonstrates that authenticity in pesantren communication originates from religious values of sincerity and simplicity (Kartika et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021; Visser et al., 2021). Theoretically, these findings extend value-based communication theory by integrating Islamic institutional ethics into digital branding. In practice, pesantren administrators should prioritize consistency between digital narratives and organizational behavior to establish sustainable stakeholder trust and strengthen institutional credibility in increasingly competitive Islamic educational environments.

The findings further reveal that institutional sustainability is sustained through the continuous implementation of simplicity across educational management, community engagement, leadership practices, and digital communication. This result aligns with previous sustainability literature, arguing that organizational resilience depends on internal consistency rather than material expansion alone (Vaio et al., 2024; Shukla et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the present study demonstrates that sustainability within Islamic educational institutions emerges from integrating religious values into everyday organizational activities rather than relying solely on financial or infrastructural growth. Theoretically, this finding broadens institutional sustainability frameworks by incorporating value-oriented organizational culture (Berger et al., 2024; Umah et al., 2023). In practice, pesantren leaders should strengthen institutional resilience by embedding simplicity throughout governance, educational services, and stakeholder engagement.

The documentation findings demonstrate that digital narratives systematically transform everyday educational activities into recognizable institutional identities across multiple digital platforms. This finding is consistent with branding studies suggesting that coherent organizational storytelling strengthens institutional differentiation and public recognition (Rout et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2022). However, unlike conventional digital marketing approaches emphasizing persuasive promotion, the documented narratives primarily highlight authentic educational experiences and religious commitment. Consequently, digital communication functions as a medium for preserving institutional identity while simultaneously enhancing market competitiveness (Gorbatov et al., 2024; Mishra et al., 2023). Theoretically, the findings contribute to digital narrative theory by illustrating that value-centered storytelling can generate symbolic legitimacy and strategic differentiation. In practice, pesantren should continuously develop consistent digital documentation that reflects authentic institutional values.

Taken together, the three findings demonstrate an interconnected mechanism through which digital narratives generate institutional sustainability. Authentic communication establishes stakeholder trust, operational consistency reinforces institutional resilience, and systematic digital documentation strengthens organizational visibility within competitive Islamic educational markets. This integrated

process differs from previous studies that frequently analyze communication, branding, or sustainability independently. Instead, the present findings suggest that these dimensions mutually reinforce one another through a shared foundation of simplicity as an institutional value. Theoretically, this research proposes an integrated framework connecting digital narratives, stakeholder trust, and sustainability. In practice, pesantren should develop coordinated communication strategies that link organizational values, educational practices, and digital engagement.

Overall, this study demonstrates that pesantren simplicity should be understood not merely as a religious tradition but also as a strategic intangible asset supporting long-term institutional sustainability. The findings complement existing literature on digital branding and institutional management while offering a distinct Islamic economic perspective that positions religious values as productive organizational resources. Unlike market-oriented branding models centered primarily on competitive promotion, this research shows that sustainable competitiveness may emerge from authenticity, ethical consistency, and value-based communication. Theoretically, the study enriches interdisciplinary discussions connecting digital communication, institutional sustainability, and Islamic economics. In practical terms, the findings guide Islamic educational institutions seeking to preserve religious identity while strengthening competitiveness in increasingly digital educational markets.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital narratives of pesantren simplicity function as strategic organizational assets that strengthen stakeholder trust, reinforce institutional sustainability, and enhance competitiveness within Islamic educational markets. The most significant finding is that authenticity emerges when digital communication consistently reflects everyday educational practices, transforming religious values into sustainable institutional capital rather than merely promotional content. The study contributes theoretically by integrating digital narrative theory, institutional sustainability, and Islamic economics into a unified analytical framework explaining value-based competitive advantage. However, the research is limited to a single qualitative case, restricting broader generalization. Future studies should employ comparative multi-site investigations or mixed-method approaches to examine the effectiveness of digital narratives across diverse Islamic educational institutions and cultural contexts.

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