

Digital Public Relations in Islamic Boarding Schools: The SANtren Pro-Media Model for Value-Governed Stakeholder Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Islamic boarding schools, known as *pesantren*, built their reputation for generations through oral tradition and the personal authority of the *kiai*, yet digital platforms have moved that reputation into an environment where visibility and responsiveness now shape public trust. This study examines how social-media-based public relations is designed and implemented to strengthen the institutional image of *pesantren* without weakening their religious identity and hierarchical traditions. A qualitative multisite case study was conducted at two established *pesantren* in East Java, Indonesia, drawing on interviews, non-participant observation, documents, and platform analytics, and the evidence was analyzed through within-case, cross-case, and triangulation procedures. Findings reveal a shift from oral communication toward formal and value-governed public-relations structures in which creative teams operate under managerial and religious oversight, communication is segmented across platforms for different stakeholders, and content combines trend responsiveness with institutional validation. Social media expands reach, transparency, and stakeholder attachment, but it produces institutionally bounded dialogue rather than fully symmetrical communication. These patterns are synthesized into the six-stage SANtren Pro-Media Model and the Digital Loyalty Loop, both governed by *tabligh* and *amanah* as ethical principles. The study implies that *pesantren* can pursue digital relevance and public accountability while preserving religious identity when digital communication is institutionalized as a professional governance function.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has changed the conditions under which religious authority, institutional legitimacy, and public reputation are produced and contested. Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) historically built their authority on the charisma of the *kiai*, scholarly lineage, religious knowledge, and long-standing community recognition, yet that authority is now negotiated within a platform-mediated public sphere. Algorithms shape which information becomes visible, and engagement mechanisms determine which narratives gain attention, so a systematic review confirms that algorithmic systems and digital platforms shape information distribution, public trust, and media legitimacy (Hastuti et al., 2025). Research on institutional communication further finds that social-media effectiveness



depends on the strategic integration of content, interaction, and stakeholder responsiveness rather than posting frequency alone (Capriotti & Zeler, 2023), and within *pesantren* social media has become an arena for constructing religious narratives for digitally connected audiences (Hakim, 2023). Limited digital visibility, then, is no longer institutional modesty but a weakness that can erode a *pesantren's* capacity to articulate its identity and shape public discourse.

Public trust in educational institutions now depends on their capacity to communicate transparently and responsively across diverse stakeholder groups. Institutional legitimacy holds when organizations recognize the differentiated expectations of students, parents, alumni, government agencies, and communities instead of treating communication as a one-way channel. Studies of higher-education institutions show that relational, responsive communication strengthens stakeholder relationships more than promotional messaging does (Jain et al., 2024), and that social-media presence shapes organizational media use and stakeholder loyalty through perceptions of reputation, content evaluation, and institutional identification (Maring & Gmür, 2025). Social-media marketing activities also contribute to behavioral engagement by building institutional brand equity (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022), while evidence from Indonesian educational institutions shows that professionally managed social media reinforces public-relations functions and institutional reputation (Fauzi et al., 2025). Engagement metrics therefore work as observable indicators of attention and interaction that feed broader evaluations of institutional image and, over time, reputation.

Pesantren face a genuine communication paradox that current research has documented only in fragments. Their internal traditions emphasize hierarchy, interpersonal relationships, oral transmission, and deference to religious authority, whereas contemporary digital publics expect immediacy, accessibility, participation, and transparency. Case-based research shows that *pesantren* have adopted social media for publication and information dissemination, but digital communication still centers on broadcasting rather than on managing relationships with external stakeholders (Indrioko, 2023). Other studies establish that *pesantren* can support media literacy and public education (Rahma, 2023), that social media can connect religious communication, community engagement, and institutional development (Syaefudin et al., 2025), and that social media becomes strategically meaningful when it builds community and sustains engagement rather than serving as a digital noticeboard (Citra et al., 2024). Read together, these studies show that digital platforms are embedded in *pesantren* communication, yet each illuminates only a single function or campaign rather than a complete managerial system.

This fragmentation becomes most visible during institutional crises, where inconsistent communication carries the heaviest cost. In September 2025, the collapse of a prayer hall at Al-Khoziny Islamic Boarding School in Sidoarjo drew intense public scrutiny of institutional safety, governance, and accountability, and soon afterward a separate reputational crisis emerged when *pesantren* communities perceived a television segment about Pesantren Lirboyo as demeaning their traditions, which sparked social-media discourse under #BoikotTrans7. One case involved physical safety and the other media representation, yet both show how institutional events turn into broader reputational narratives within networked environments. Lestari (2026) analyzes Instagram discourse around the Trans7 controversy and captures the intensity with which mediated representations of *pesantren* generate public sentiment, while research on Islamic value-based crisis communication emphasizes transparency, responsibility, and coordinated responses to protect credibility during uncertainty (Suhendri et al., 2025). The clear gap is that strategic public-relations management, digital analytics, stakeholder engagement, and Islamic ethical values remain poorly integrated into one managerial framework for *pesantren*.

The novelty of this study follows directly from that gap and lies in an integrated managerial explanation rather than another account of platform use. Existing work

documents publications, religious messaging, engagement, reputation, and crisis communication in depth, but the literature has not explained how *tabligh*, meaning truthful and transparent communication, and *amanah*, meaning responsibility and accountability, can be operationalized throughout the digital public-relations process instead of remaining normative concepts detached from practice. To address this, the study proposes the SANtren Pro-Media Model, a context-sensitive extension of the conventional strategic public-relations cycle that adds Community Engagement and Continuous Improvement as explicit operational stages and treats communication as recursive rather than linear. This framing matters because leading universities often retain interactive resources without achieving dialogic communication (Capriotti et al., 2024), which suggests that professionalization alone does not guarantee genuine engagement. The model therefore integrates ethical governance, stakeholder feedback, and data-informed evaluation within a single analytical structure.

This study asks how social-media-based public-relations management systems are designed and implemented to sustainably strengthen the institutional image of *pesantren* in the digital era. Its central argument holds that social media strengthens institutional image when it is managed professionally, dialogically, and consistently, and when it stays anchored in the ethical principles of Islamic education. Because the phenomenon is embedded in institutional values, hierarchical authority, and stakeholder relationships, the study adopts a qualitative multisite approach that seeks depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization, tracing how two established *pesantren* navigate the tension between traditional religious authority and contemporary expectations for transparency and real-time communication. Professionalizing digital public relations, in this view, is not a departure from *pesantren* tradition but an institutional mechanism for sustaining religious identity, public accountability, and educational legitimacy in a networked society. The following section sets out the research design used to examine these dynamics.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multisite case study design to examine how Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) design and implement social media-based public relations (PR) management. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation consists of institutionally embedded communication practices, religious values, organizational processes, and stakeholder relationships that require contextual and interpretive understanding rather than numerical measurement. Qualitative case study research is well suited to complex organizational processes situated in their real-life settings and generates theoretically meaningful explanations from contextually grounded evidence (Al Qur'an, 2025). The multisite logic compared two institutionally distinct yet analytically comparable *pesantren*, prioritizing analytical generalization and theoretical transferability over statistical representativeness, so that patterns holding across sites could be distinguished from practices that remained context-specific (Köhler, 2024). The two sites were selected purposively as information-rich cases: Pondok Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong and Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid Paiton, both in Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia. Both carry substantial historical and religious significance, operate formal communication or PR units with active accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, and connect their digital communication to broader governance instruments such as medium-term strategic planning documents. Because both represent relatively well-organized institutions, the findings are expected to transfer mainly to *pesantren* with comparable governance structures and digital communication capacities rather than to the highly diverse *pesantren* population as a whole.

Data collection combined three complementary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant and non-interventionist observation, and document analysis. Interviews captured how organizational actors interpreted PR management, decisions, and stakeholder relations in their own terms, while the semi-structured format maintained consistency across participants and left room to explore emergent issues (Knott et al., 2022).

Informants were recruited purposively based on their roles, knowledge, and direct involvement in institutional communication (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025), and included the *pengasuh* or *kiai* as religious leaders, heads and staff of PR or communication and information (*Kominfo*) units, digital content creators, *santri*, alumni, and parents, thereby capturing managerial, operational, and stakeholder perspectives. Observation focused on routine communication practices, coordination among PR personnel, content planning and production, publication workflows, and patterns of digital interaction between the *pesantren* and external publics, with the researcher acting as the primary instrument without deliberately altering the processes under study. Document analysis examined institutional profiles, strategic and regulatory documents, internal communication policies, published social media content, platform-based performance reports such as Instagram Insights, web analytics, and institutional regulations including the *Kompilasi Peraturan Pesantren*. To clarify how each research focus was corroborated across these three techniques, the overall research design and its triangulation logic are summarized in Table 1. Combining verbal accounts, observed practices, and documented records strengthened the evidentiary basis of the study, since triangulation in case study research is strongest when evidence from different sources and methods is systematically compared rather than merely accumulated (Schlunegger et al., 2024).

Table 1. Research Design and Triangulation Matrix

Research Focus	Interview	Observation	Document & Analytics		Convergent Verification
PR management design	Heads and staff of <i>Kominfo</i> / PR units; <i>pengasuh</i>	Coordination routines; role differentiation	<i>Renstra</i> , <i>Kompilasi Pesantren</i> , records	<i>AKUP</i> , <i>Peraturan</i> meeting	Cross-checked across all three sources
Implementation of social media PR	Content creators; PR staff; <i>kiai</i> / <i>gus</i>	Content planning, production, and approval workflows	Published content; editorial coordination records		Cross-checked across all three sources
Stakeholder engagement	<i>Santri</i> , alumni, parents	Patterns of digital interaction with publics	Instagram Insights; web analytics		Cross-checked across all three sources
Institutional image and outcomes	Leaders; alumni; parents	Live-streamed activities; audience response	Platform performance reports; digital archives		Cross-checked across all three sources

Data analysis proceeded iteratively and concurrently with data collection, following the interactive logic of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, interview transcripts, observational records, documentary materials, and digital evidence were reviewed, coded, and categorized around the study's major concerns, including strategic PR planning, digital content management, stakeholder engagement, institutional image construction, crisis communication, Islamic communication values, and evaluation practices. Data display then organized the condensed evidence into thematic matrices, process maps, and comparative tables that supported systematic examination of relationships among categories. The analysis moved deliberately between within-case analysis, which reconstructed each *pesantren's* communication system in its institutional context, and cross-case analysis, which compared convergent patterns, contextual differences, and distinctive managerial practices across the two institutions, so that locally specific practices could be separated from patterns of broader theoretical relevance (Köhler, 2024). Credibility and trustworthiness were reinforced through data-source, methodological, and temporal triangulation, member checking with selected institutional informants (Lloyd et al., 2024; Urry et al., 2024), and reflexivity throughout interpretation and model development (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The SANtren Pro-Media Model was not imposed on the field data but emerged from this iterative synthesis of

empirical patterns across the two cases and their relationship to established concepts in strategic public relations management.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

TQM contributes to character education by integrating affective outcomes into the operational structure of schooling. The development of discipline, responsibility, and independence reflects the successful internalization of norms facilitated by continuous practice and feedback mechanisms. This supports the view that sustainable character development requires an enabling environment rather than sporadic interventions. TQM, with its principles of continuous improvement and process orientation, ensures that character-building practices are embedded in everyday learning activities, making them more enduring and measurable. Additionally, the indirect nature of this process strengthens its impact, as students develop character organically without feeling subjected to formal moral instruction. This has important implications for educational management, suggesting that character education should not be treated as a separate program but integrated into institutional systems and routines. Therefore, TQM provides a strategic framework that bridges academic quality and character formation, positioning schools as environments that cultivate holistic student development.

The Design of Public Relations Management in Pesantren

The findings indicate that public relations management in the pesantren context operates as a strategic governance framework that integrates planning, organizational structuring, implementation through standard operating procedures, and control mechanisms grounded in Islamic values. Rather than functioning merely as a set of technical communication activities, PR management constitutes a systematic institutional blueprint that aligns digital communication practices with the broader vision and educational mission of the pesantren. Operationally, this design is reflected in a clear division of authority between creative and technical personnel, who are responsible for content production and dissemination, and the pengasuh or senior religious leadership, who exercise normative and ethical oversight. This arrangement is intended to ensure that every digital message is accountable, transparent, institutionally appropriate, and consistent with the pesantren's identity as an institution of Islamic education and character formation.

At Pondok Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong (PPZH), interviews with the Head of the Communication and Information Bureau revealed a highly differentiated distribution of roles intended to minimize overlapping responsibilities. The head of the bureau primarily oversees the alignment of published content with institutional guidelines and communication objectives, while the operational head coordinates personnel and manages day-to-day implementation. The team secretary further explained that major decisions, task assignments, and workflow arrangements are systematically documented in meeting records to support administrative accountability. These findings suggest the emergence of what may be described as professionalized bureaucratization within the pesantren environment. Traditional patterns of obedience and respect for institutional authority have not disappeared; rather, they have been translated into a more formal organizational structure characterized by role differentiation, administrative documentation, coordination, and measurable accountability.

A similar but more policy-oriented pattern was identified at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid (PPNJ). The Head of the Public Relations Subdivision explained that content-production policies are consistently aligned with two formal strategic documents: the institution's five-year Strategic Plan (*Rencana Strategis* or *Renstra*) and the annual General Policy Direction of the Pengasuh (*Arah Kebijakan Umum Pengasuh* or *AKUP*). An Information and Communication staff member confirmed that these documents serve as

primary references in determining content priorities, communication themes, and appropriate modes of message delivery. This finding indicates the integration of strategic institutional values into PR practices. Public communication is therefore not primarily organized on an incidental or reactive basis but is embedded within a longer-term planning framework that connects digital communication activities with institutional policy, educational priorities, and the overall vision of the pesantren.

Observational data from both sites further confirmed that these formal structures were reflected in the media teams' routine practices. At the Communication and Information Bureau of PPZH, team members generally worked within clearly defined areas of specialization. Graphic designers, for example, focused primarily on visual production, while other personnel were assigned responsibilities in writing, documentation, publication, and media coordination. At PPNJ, however, a somewhat more flexible pattern was observed. Staff members frequently collaborated across functional boundaries, particularly when responding to tight publication deadlines, with personnel assisting one another in areas such as journalism, design, and content preparation. These observations suggest that both pesantren employ an adaptive yet hierarchical management model. Technical work is characterized by a degree of flexibility and operational agility, but the overall communication process remains subject to hierarchical supervision. Senior religious authorities, including the kiai and gus, continue to play an important role in content validation and moral oversight, including through digital coordination channels such as Telegram groups before content is released to the public.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate a gradual transformation in the design of PR management across the two pesantren. Communication practices have shifted from predominantly oral, personalized patterns toward increasingly formalized systems supported by strategic documents, differentiated organizational roles, administrative records, and digital coordination mechanisms. Technical leadership exercised by the Communication and Information Bureau or the Public Relations Subdivision serves as the operational engine of content production, while the kiai or pengasuh provides the highest level of normative oversight. This configuration indicates that adopting modern management principles does not necessarily displace the spiritual authority traditionally associated with pesantren governance. Instead, formal administrative structures and religious supervision coexist within an integrated communication system in which professional efficiency is balanced with moral legitimacy.

Table 2. Strategic and Moral Authority in Pesantren Public Relations Management

Informant Position	Key Interview Excerpt	Indicator of Idealized Influence
Head of Communication and Information Bureau, PPZH	"My responsibility is to ensure that all published content complies with pesantren guidelines and is appropriate for the intended audience."	Strategic Formal Leadership
Head of Public Relations Subdivision, PPNJ	"Every policy and decision concerning content production consistently refers to the five-year Strategic Plan and the annual AKUP."	Formal Policy Consistency
Kiai/Pengasuh, PPNJ and PPZH	"The kiai consistently monitors the content. If any content is considered inappropriate or exceeds acceptable boundaries, he provides direct correction."	Moral Authority and Supervision

Table 1 illustrates the interaction between administrative authority and spiritual authority in shaping institutional communication within pesantren public relations management. Idealized influence does not emerge solely from formal managerial positions or technical expertise. Still, it is reinforced through adherence to institutional policies and strategic planning documents, as well as continuous moral supervision by the kiai or pengasuh. In this structure, the head of the communication unit and public relations

subdivision provide operational direction and managerial control, while the *kiai* functions as the primary source of normative legitimacy. This layered configuration produces a multi-level system of quality control in which technical competence, organizational accountability, and religious appropriateness operate simultaneously to shape communication outputs.

The findings further indicate that the principle of *amanah* is embedded in this governance system, extending accountability beyond the administrative hierarchy to include ethical and spiritual responsibilities. As a result, digital content is not treated merely as institutional promotion, but as a representation of *pesantren* identity, values, and public responsibility. Across both sites, there is a clear shift from centralized oral communication toward structured, participatory management, although hierarchical authority remains intact through formal roles, strategic documents such as the *Renstra* and *AKUP*, and digital supervision mechanisms. This configuration balances agility and stability, maintaining operational flexibility in content production within a firmly regulated, ethical, and institutional framework, resulting in a value-governed, adaptive professionalism that preserves both modern communication efficiency and traditional Islamic legitimacy.

Implementation of Social Media-Based Public Relations Management

The implementation of social media-based public relations management in this study refers to the tactical and operational processes through which strategic communication plans are translated into digital practice. At *Pondok Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong* (PPZH), content production follows a layered, collaborative workflow in which ideas are generated from students' daily activities, institutional programs, and religious events; developed by the creative team; and then submitted for internal review before publication. Final approval is provided by the supervisory authority representing the *pengasuh*, indicating a form of creative bureaucratization in which media personnel are encouraged to innovate within clearly defined institutional and moral boundaries. A similar, but more trend-oriented, pattern was observed at *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid* (PPNJ), where content development begins with identifying current trends, audience interests, and relevant digital references. Brainstorming is used to adapt traditional religious and educational messages into contemporary formats, particularly for younger audiences, while consultation with institutional leaders ensures consistency with *pesantren* values. This process reflects value synchronization, in which modern digital communication aligns with established religious and organizational norms.

Across both sites, the implementation process reflects a hybrid management model that combines the operational agility of creative teams with the normative authority of *pesantren* leadership. Observational findings confirmed that both institutions have adopted increasingly professional media-production practices, including specialized personnel, dedicated workspaces, graphic-design and video-editing technologies, structured editorial coordination, and layered quality-control mechanisms. Content is assessed not only for visual quality and audience appeal but also for institutional legitimacy, moral appropriateness, and consistency with the *pesantren*'s educational mission. At the same time, digital communication is increasingly differentiated according to stakeholder characteristics. Parents are reached through more direct, informational channels, alumni through community-oriented, nostalgic content, and younger audiences through short-form visual formats and trend-sensitive platforms. This indicates the emergence of stakeholder-oriented communication, in which message design, channel selection, and content emphasis are adjusted to the specific needs and media habits of different audiences. The cross-site workflow synthesized from these implementation practices is presented in Figure 1.

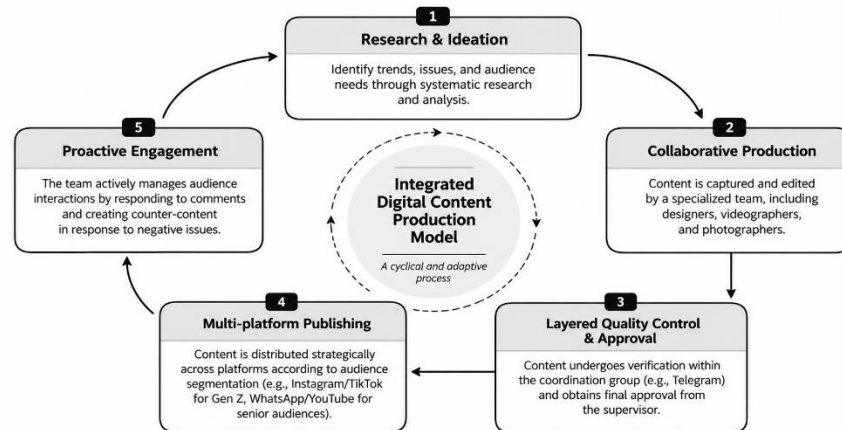


Figure 1. Workflow for Digital Public Relations Management Implementation

Figure 1 illustrates a cyclical workflow for implementing digital public relations management in pesantren, beginning with research and ideation, in which the communication team identifies emerging trends, relevant issues, and audience needs as the basis for content development. These insights are translated into collaborative production, involving specialized personnel such as designers, videographers, photographers, and content creators. The resulting content then undergoes layered quality control and approval, ensuring that both technical standards and institutional values are maintained before publication. Once approved, the content is distributed through a multi-platform publishing strategy tailored to specific audience segments, with platforms selected according to demographic characteristics and communication preferences. The process continues through proactive engagement, in which the team responds to audience interactions, addresses negative perceptions, and develops counter-content when necessary. Importantly, the circular structure indicates that engagement outcomes feed back into subsequent research and ideation, demonstrating that digital PR implementation is not linear but an adaptive, iterative, and stakeholder-oriented process that integrates creative flexibility, institutional control, and continuous responsiveness.

The findings further show that both pesantren have moved beyond purely one-directional communication by using social media as a space for interaction, clarification, feedback, and selective response to public concerns. However, this interaction remains institutionally mediated because final communication authority continues to rest with pesantren leadership. The observed pattern is therefore better characterized as controlled dialogic communication rather than fully symmetrical two-way communication. More broadly, the cross-site findings reveal a pattern of digital–traditional alignment, in which technology functions as an instrument serving the ideological and ethical orientation of the pesantren rather than determining it. Digital innovation is incorporated through a cyclical process that moves from trend-based ideation to value-based validation, enabling both institutions to respond to contemporary media culture while preserving institutional authenticity, religious authority, and reputational coherence.

Table 3. Leadership and Value-Based Practices in the Implementation of Social Media-Based Public Relations Management

Informant Position	Key Interview Excerpt	Indicator of Idealized Influence
Head of Communication and Information Bureau, PPZH	"The <i>pengasub</i> team provides final approval before publication to ensure that the content remains consistent with pesantren guidelines."	Value-Based Validation Authority
Head of Public Relations Subdivision, PPNJ	"The team always begins by brainstorming ideas based on current trends, but each piece of content must remain consistent with institutional guidelines."	Strategic Creative Leadership

Informant Position	Key Interview Excerpt	Indicator of Idealized Influence
Social Media Staff, PPNJ	“Content distribution through WhatsApp is particularly helpful for reaching older audiences, especially parents and alumni.”	Inclusive Digital Communication

The findings presented in Table 2 indicate that idealized influence in pesantren public relations arises from the interaction between formal managerial authority and charismatic-religious leadership. The effectiveness of digital communication is not determined solely by the technical competence of media personnel. Still, it is reinforced by leadership mechanisms that provide strategic direction, define communication boundaries, and ensure alignment between creative outputs and institutional values. Formal planning instruments such as the Renstra and AKUP, together with the supervisory authority of the pengasuh, function as complementary governance structures that preserve the moral and symbolic identity of pesantren communication. In addition, there is a clear pattern of social sensitivity in platform selection, where different communication channels are deliberately used for different stakeholder groups. In contrast, Instagram and TikTok target younger audiences, while WhatsApp and Telegram are maintained to ensure accessibility for parents, *alumni*, and older stakeholders. This reflects a communication strategy that recognizes stakeholders as differentiated publics, requiring tailored engagement rather than treating them as a homogeneous audience.

Overall, the implementation pattern can be characterized as hierarchical participatory integration within a broader framework of value-regulated digital adaptability. Digital public relations practices at PPZH and PPNJ combine participatory content production where creative teams actively generate ideas, interpret trends, and design messages with centralized normative control, where final publication authority remains with pesantren leadership. This dual structure creates a balance between innovation and control: participatory processes enhance relevance and audience engagement, while hierarchical validation ensures consistency with institutional ethics, religious values, and reputational integrity. Consequently, the communication system reflects an adaptive organizational model in which professional digital practices, stakeholder responsiveness, and pesantren ideological commitments are continuously negotiated and integrated.

Implications of Public Relations Management and the SANtren Pro-Media Model

The implications of public relations management in this study refer to the strategic outcomes of digital communication for institutional image, information reach, transparency, accountability, and stakeholder relationships. Across both research sites, social media substantially expanded the spatial and temporal reach of institutional communication, enabling information that had previously circulated within geographically limited communities to reach wider audiences almost instantaneously. This multiplier effect of digital reach has transformed social media from a supplementary publication channel into an important instrument of institutional branding and relationship management. Regular dissemination of authentic content concerning students' daily activities, educational achievements, religious programs, and institutional developments also appears to strengthen perceptions of transparency and accountability while maintaining relational proximity with geographically dispersed stakeholders.

At Pondok Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong (PPZH), the Head of the Communication and Information Bureau reported that Instagram and TikTok were approximately 80% more effective in reaching Generation Z audiences than conventional communication methods, although this figure represents the informant's assessment unless independently verified through comparable performance metrics. Platform analytics were also reported to show substantial increases in audience reach, indicating digital

communicative efficiency through the reduction of spatial and procedural barriers between the institution and younger publics. At Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid (PPNJ), the Head of the Public Relations Subdivision emphasized the relational benefits of digital communication, particularly for parents living far from the institution. Regular content documenting students' activities provided reassurance and a stronger sense of connection, while alumni described rapid digital information distribution as strengthening attachment and pride in their alma mater. Collectively, these findings indicate an expansion of informational accessibility, through which stakeholders can access institutional information more regularly and directly, potentially reinforcing trust and relational continuity when communication is perceived as credible, relevant, and authentic.

The cross-site findings were synthesized into the SANtren Pro-Media Model, consisting of six interrelated stages: Situation Analysis, Strategic Planning, Content Design and Curation, Community Engagement, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement. Situation Analysis identifies internal conditions, stakeholder expectations, emerging issues, and the digital environment; Strategic Planning establishes communication objectives, key messages, audience segmentation, platform selection, and value-based priorities; and Content Design and Curation translates these priorities into educational, informative, inspirational, and authentic digital content. Community Engagement facilitates interaction, feedback, clarification, and stakeholder participation, while Monitoring and Evaluation assesses communication performance using indicators such as reach, engagement, audience response, Instagram Insights, and web analytics where available. Finally, Continuous Improvement integrates evaluation results and stakeholder feedback into subsequent communication decisions. Thus, the SANtren Pro-Media Model conceptualizes digital PR as an iterative, stakeholder-responsive, and value-governed management cycle, rather than a linear process of content production and dissemination.

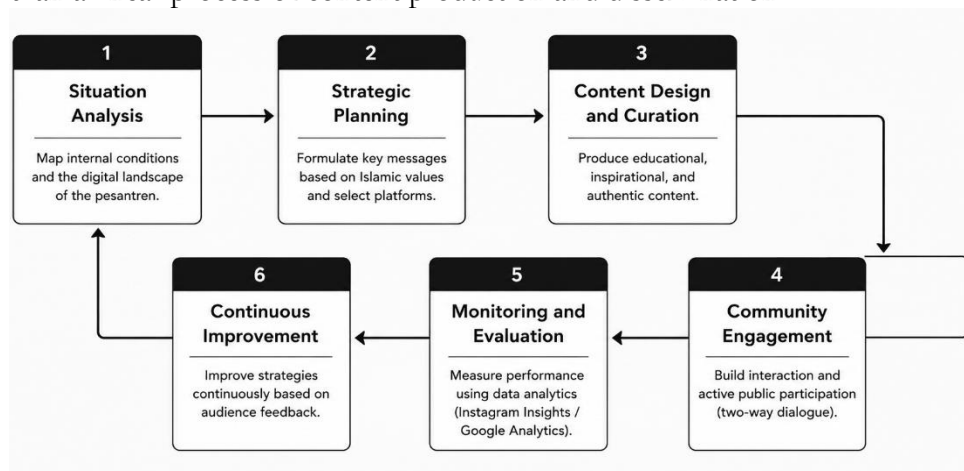


Figure 2. SANtren Pro-Media Model

The official social media accounts of both pesantren revealed substantial audience engagement with religious messages, student achievements, institutional events, and live-streamed religious lectures. These digital activities enable alumni, parents, and geographically dispersed audiences to remain connected to pesantren life in real time, contributing to the emergence of an extended digital community beyond the institutions' physical boundaries. Social media therefore functions not only as a publication channel but also as a mediated space for religious communication, institutional identity formation, and stakeholder interaction. This expansion remains governed by pesantren values, particularly *tabligh* as truthful and transparent communication and *amanah* as responsibility and accountability. Accordingly, digital PR strengthens institutional visibility and stakeholder relationships when communication is perceived as timely, credible, authentic, and consistent with the institution's actual practices.

Across both sites, this relationship can be conceptualized as a Digital Loyalty Loop,

in which transparent and consistent communication increases stakeholders' access to institutional information, reinforces trust and relational reassurance, and encourages continued engagement. Repeated interaction may subsequently strengthen emotional attachment, institutional identification, and supportive behavior, thereby reinforcing institutional image. Within the SANtren Pro-Media Model, digital communication thus serves as an interface between traditional religious authority and contemporary expectations for accessibility and responsiveness. However, because final communication authority remains within the pesantren leadership structure, this relationship is more accurately characterized as institutionally bounded dialogic communication rather than fully symmetrical communication. The resulting pattern reflects a mutually reinforcing interaction among informational transparency, stakeholder trust, engagement, attachment, and institutional image rather than a simple linear causal relationship.

Table 4. Stakeholder-Level Implications of Pesantren Public Relations Management

Informant Position	Key Interview Excerpt	Empirical Indicator	
Head of Public Relations Subdivision, PPNJ	"Social media creates a substantial leap in reach, enabling information to reach thousands of people within a short period compared with conventional methods."	Expanded Reach	Digital
Parent of a Student, PPZH	"I feel more reassured because I can follow my child's development every day through social media."	Transparency and Relational Trust	
Alumnus, PPZH	"Seeing nostalgic photographs of the pesantren makes me continue to feel connected and loyal to the institution."	Emotional Attachment and Alumni Loyalty	

Table 3 demonstrates that the implications of digital PR are both informational and relational. Social media accelerates institutional communication, expands its reach, and reduces perceived distance between pesantren and their stakeholders. Regular access to information provides parents with reassurance regarding their children's development, while nostalgic and institutionally meaningful content helps sustain alumni attachment and loyalty. These findings suggest that digital communication acquires strategic value not merely through visibility or reach, but through its capacity to combine technological efficiency with meaningful stakeholder relationships.

The findings also reveal a technology-spirituality synergy, in which digital platforms extend the circulation of religious teachings, institutional traditions, and the symbolic authority of the kiai without displacing the spiritual character of the pesantren. This expanded visibility simultaneously increases the need for accountability, making *tabligh* and *amanah* essential normative safeguards for digital communication. Thus, the strategic implications of social media-based PR emerge from the interaction among technological reach, informational transparency, stakeholder attachment, and value-based governance. Within the SANtren Pro-Media Model, these elements form a value-governed institutional learning cycle in which stakeholder feedback informs subsequent communication strategies while preserving the institution's moral legitimacy and cultural authenticity.

Discussion

The findings show that public relations management in the two *pesantren* has evolved from mostly oral and personalized communication into a formal governance system that combines strategic planning, differentiated roles, documented procedures, and religious oversight. This pattern of professionalized bureaucratization and adaptive hierarchy supports Indrioko's (2023) finding that social media has become an institutional publication instrument in *pesantren*, but it extends that work by showing that digitalization restructures authority, workflow, and accountability rather than simply adding a publication channel. It parallels higher-education research showing that effective social-media communication requires coordinated posting, content, and interactivity rather than platform presence alone.

(Capriotti & Zeler, 2023). The present findings still differ from conventional institutional communication models because managerial authority is not fully secularized, since the *keiai* or *pengasub* remains the normative gatekeeper. Modernization therefore occurs through institutional layering rather than displacement, and the resulting governance arrangement keeps administrative professionalism connected to moral legitimacy and *pesantren* identity.

The implementation findings reveal a hybrid workflow that moves from trend research and collaborative production toward layered quality control, platform-specific publication, and proactive engagement. This pattern is consistent with research showing that educational institutions increasingly use social media strategically to build community, sustain engagement, strengthen branding, and adapt to their audiences (Citra et al., 2024; Pawar, 2024), and it complements Hakim's (2023) finding that *pesantren* can package religious messages in visually and linguistically accessible forms for younger audiences. The two cases add an important qualification, however, because creative adaptation is not autonomous. Trend-sensitive content is filtered through institutional and religious approval before release, which differs from market-oriented social-media models in which audience appeal may drive content decisions. The *pesantren* cases instead demonstrate value-governed digital adaptability, a pattern in which technological agility operates within clear normative boundaries so that content relevance and institutional authenticity are pursued together rather than treated as competing objectives.

Stakeholder segmentation and controlled dialogic communication form another important finding. Both institutions differentiate platforms and content for younger audiences, parents, and alumni while keeping centralized authority over final messaging. This aligns with Jain et al. (2024), who argue that higher-education relationship management must recognize multiple stakeholder groups with distinct expectations, and with Maring and Gmür (2025), who connect university social-media presence to organizational media use and loyalty. The findings depart, however, from the assumption that digital interactivity necessarily produces symmetrical communication. Capriotti et al. (2024) found that leading universities remain mostly informational and monologic despite using interactive resources, and Capriotti and Zeler (2023) identified similarly weak dialogic performance. The *pesantren* cases occupy an intermediate position in which interaction, clarification, and feedback are encouraged but normative decision rights stay hierarchical. In theoretical terms, this supports the concept of institutionally bounded dialogic communication rather than unrestricted two-way symmetry.

The reported implications for visibility, trust, attachment, and institutional image are consistent with recent evidence on social-media engagement and brand outcomes. Song et al. (2023) found that social interaction, information sharing, and information quantity strengthen relationship quality and support brand image and loyalty, Ruangkanjanases et al. (2022) showed that social-media marketing activities influence behavioral engagement through brand equity, and Perera et al. (2023) connected social-media brand engagement to customer-based brand equity in higher education. The present study extends these relationships into the *pesantren* setting through the Digital Loyalty Loop, in which transparent information improves relational reassurance, repeated engagement sustains attachment, and attachment reinforces institutional image. The findings do not establish deterministic causality, however. They point to a mutually reinforcing process in which communication quality interacts with how stakeholders actually experience institutional performance, which is consistent with evidence that relational marketing shapes organizational reputation through desired impressions (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2022).

A distinctive contribution concerns how Islamic values are built into digital public-relations governance. Earlier *pesantren* studies show that social media can spread religious moderation (Hakim, 2023), strengthen media literacy and public education (Rahma, 2023), and mobilize community participation for *da'wah* and institutional development (Syaefudin et al., 2025), and recent work on Islamic value-based crisis communication emphasizes *amanah*, verification, and consultative hierarchy as foundations of credible institutional

responses (Suhendri et al., 2026). The present findings agree with these studies but move past treating Islamic values mainly as message content or crisis principles. Here *tabligh* and *amanah* are embedded throughout planning, approval, publication, engagement, and evaluation, so that spirituality works as a governance mechanism rather than a symbolic communication layer. The way these three concepts fit together as a single system is presented in Figure 3, where value-governed digital adaptability regulates content production, institutionally bounded dialogic communication governs stakeholder interaction, and the Digital Loyalty Loop channels the resulting engagement back into institutional image, with *tabligh* and *amanah* anchoring the whole cycle and a feedback path returning stakeholder response to strategic decisions. This configuration explains how religious legitimacy can structure professional digital communication without blocking organizational adaptation, and it is formalized in the SANtren Pro-Media Model, which makes engagement and continuous improvement explicit managerial stages within an algorithmically mediated environment where visibility and legitimacy depend on platform dynamics (Hastuti et al., 2025).

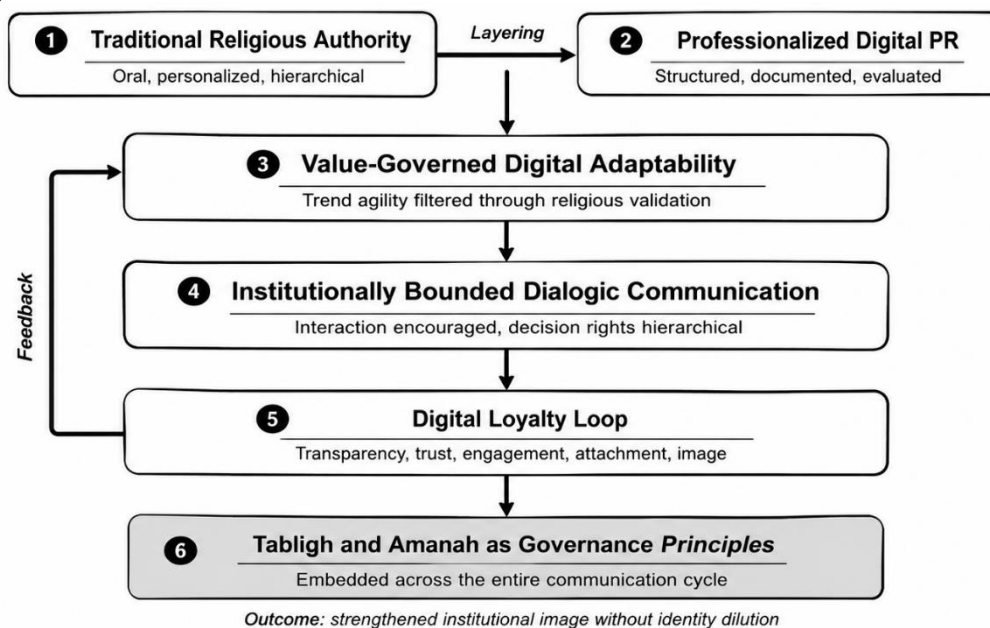


Figure 3. Integrative Synthesis of Pesantren Digital Public Relations Governance

The principal contribution of this study is therefore best understood as a contribution to the institutional transformation of faith-based education rather than to communication practice alone. The two *pesantren* show that digital transformation does not force a choice between preserving religious tradition and achieving contemporary managerial relevance, because professionalized communication becomes an institutional mechanism for sustaining religious identity, public accountability, and educational legitimacy in a networked society. This is why *pesantren* should institutionalize digital public relations as a core governance function rather than auxiliary publication work, with clear role descriptions, documented approval protocols, audience segmentation, analytics-based evaluation, and crisis-response procedures, while the *pengasuh* keeps ethical oversight without slowing responsiveness unnecessarily. Such an approach is consistent with evidence that social-media communication draws stronger stakeholder responses when organizational claims match substantive institutional practice (Jha & Verma, 2023) and that relationship-oriented engagement can strengthen image and loyalty (Song et al., 2023). By rebuilding strategic public-relations management around religious authority, stakeholder feedback, and data-informed learning, the SANtren Pro-Media Model gives Islamic educational institutions a transferable and context-sensitive architecture for pursuing digital relevance without diluting

their identity. Its value is at once managerial, ethical, and reputational, since it turns *pesantren* values into measurable communication routines, sets up feedback mechanisms for institutional learning, and offers a framework that comparable faith-based institutions can adapt as they navigate platformized public communication.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that social-media-based public relations strengthens the institutional image of *pesantren* when it is managed professionally and dialogically while remaining anchored in Islamic ethical values rather than displacing traditional religious authority. Several limitations nonetheless bound these conclusions and mark out directions for further work. The multisite qualitative design covered only two historically established and relatively well-organized *pesantren* in Probolinggo, East Java, so the findings should be read as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable to Indonesia's highly diverse *pesantren* population. Some assessments of communication effectiveness, including reported gains in audience reach, drew partly on informant accounts and available platform analytics rather than standardized longitudinal measurement, which means strong causal claims about effects on trust, loyalty, or reputation are not warranted here. Rapid shifts in platform algorithms and audience behavior may also alter how effective current practices remain over time. Future research should therefore test the SANtren Pro-Media Model across a larger and more varied set of institutions using comparative, longitudinal, and mixed-method designs, and should verify the Digital Loyalty Loop through quantitative stakeholder surveys and structural modeling.

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