

IJIBS: International Journal of Islamic Boarding School

Vol. 3 No. 1 June 2025

Available online at: https://ijibs.uinkhas.ac.id/ijibs/article/view/56/version/56

Strategic Transformation of Public Relations Management in Islamic Boarding Schools in the Digital Age

Totok Sudarmanto¹, Moh. Asy'ari², Mustapha Almasi³

¹UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember ²Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Azzain Sampang ³Mzumbe University, Morogoro, Tanzania

totoksudarmanto@uinkhas.ac.id1, asyarymoh1986@gmail.com2, amustapha@mzumbe.ac.tz3

Abstract

Article Information: Received, 2023-07-26 Revised, 2025-06-10 Accepted, 2025-06-05 Published, 2025-04-25

Keywords: Public Relations, Islamic Boarding Schools, Digital Transformation In the digital age, public relations (PR) management plays a strategic role in enhancing the competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools through communication innovation and institutional branding. However, many pesantren still rely on conventional communication patterns, resulting in a mismatch between public expectations and institutional capacities. This study aims to analyze the transformation of public relations strategies at Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School in responding to digital challenges and increasing institutional competitiveness. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, documentation, and participatory observation, then analyzed thematically. The results show that PR planning is categorized into routine and incidental programs, emphasizing flexibility and responsiveness. Implementation combines traditional and digital media to maintain cultural values while expanding outreach. Evaluation is carried out collaboratively, involving internal and external stakeholders, and supported by capacity building through Focus Group Discussions. This strategic transformation reflects an adaptive PR model that aligns with the two-way symmetrical communication theory and the PESO model. The study concludes that successful PR transformation requires not only technological adaptation but also human resource development and participatory management. The findings contribute to strengthening the institutional image and competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools in an increasingly digitalized educational landscape.

How to cite:

Sudarmanto, T., Asy'ari, M., & Almasi, M. (2025). Strategic Transformation of Public Relations Management in Islamic Boarding Schools in the Digital Age. IJIBS, 3 (1), 58-69 http://doi.org/10.35719/ijibs.v3i1.56

Publisher:



Centre for Research and Community Service (LP2M), Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember

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INTRODUCTION

Theoretically, public relations management in educational institutions is viewed as a strategic system for building image, establishing effective communication, and increasing competitiveness through a measurable, adaptive, and digitally-based approach (Wahyudin et al., 2023; Azzulfa, 2022). Modern management theory emphasizes the importance of communication innovation, social media utilization, and information transparency in responding to increasingly dynamic public needs (Nugroho & Astutik, 2024; Achmawati et al., 2024). However, social facts show that there is a significant gap. Many Islamic boarding schools still apply conventional communication patterns that have not been fully transformed digitally (Maulana et al., 2025; Carback, 2016). A crucial issue that arises is the mismatch between public expectations for professional and modern educational services and the limited capacity of Islamic boarding school public relations due to human resources, technological infrastructure, and traditional mindsets (Qoryah et al., 2024; Du et al., 2023). This gap hinders the ability of Islamic boarding schools to build competitiveness and a positive image, making the transformation of public relations strategies an urgent need that must be addressed systematically and innovatively (Allouche, 2024; Bariah, 2024).

Several previous studies have discussed the role of public relations management in Islamic educational institutions (Widodo, 2024; Afriani & Timan, 2024; Maulana et al. 2025) highlighted the importance of integrating digital technology into public relations strategies to build the brand identity of Islamic boarding schools. (Wahyudin et al.2023; Ramadita, 2023) examined the development of public relations management in the Society 5.0 era, with a focus on innovative communication. (Fadilah et al. 2022; Qodir 2022; Campbell, 2005) revealed the importance of educational marketing strategies to improve the image of Islamic boarding schools. However, these studies have not specifically reviewed the transformation of public relations management strategies in responding to the challenges of competitiveness in the digital era (Amin, 2023; Yulin & Danso, 2025). This study aims to fill this gap by emphasizing the analysis of planning, implementation, and evaluation of digital-based public relations strategies at the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School (Suprihartini et al., 2025; Munir & Su'adah, 2025, Benuf, 2020). This study also highlights real constraints such as limited human resources, infrastructure, and cultural resistance, thereby providing practical contributions to the development of adaptive and competitive public relations strategies for Islamic boarding schools in the digital era (Huda & Obianto, 2025; Farkhah et al., 2023).

This paper aims to examine in depth the transformation of public relations management strategies in Islamic boarding schools in response to the challenges of competitiveness in the digital age. The main issue to be analyzed is how the process of planning, implementing, and evaluating public relations strategies is carried out in the context of increasingly urgent digitalization. In addition, this study also seeks to reveal the extent to which the use of information technology and social media has been integrated into the communication strategies of Islamic boarding schools to build a positive image and increase public trust. This research also aims to identify various challenges faced, both in terms of human resources, infrastructure limitations, and resistance to change. Thus, this paper is expected to contribute theoretically and practically to the development of a more adaptive and innovative public relations management model that is capable of strengthening the competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools amid the tide of modernization and digital disruption.

The transformation of public relations management strategies in Islamic boarding schools is a crucial step in increasing competitiveness in the digital age. The basic argument of

this study is that the more adaptive and innovative the public relations strategies implemented, particularly through the use of digital media and communication technology, the greater the opportunity for Islamic boarding schools to build a positive image, establish extensive relationships, and increase public trust. Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan, as a traditional Islamic educational institution, is believed to face challenges in the form of limited human resources, resistance to technology, and a lack of digital infrastructure. The preliminary hypothesis of this study states that the success of PR strategy transformation is largely determined by the quality of planning, the suitability of implementation to public needs, and the effectiveness of communication program evaluation. With a systematic and digitally-oriented approach, Islamic boarding schools can strengthen their position in the competition among educational institutions in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type. The focus of the study is directed at the transformation of public relations management strategies at the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School, located in Sanalaok Village, Waru District, Pamekasan Regency, Madura, and how these strategies respond to the challenges of competitiveness in the digital era. The selection of this location is based on the characteristics of the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School, which is currently striving to modernize its communication and publication strategies without abandoning the Islamic values that form the identity of the boarding school.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews with public relations managers, Islamic boarding school leaders, and relevant staff; documentation, such as public relations work programs, media publications, and institutional evaluation reports; and participatory observation to directly observe internal and external communication practices, the use of digital media, and engagement with the public. Data analysis used thematic analysis techniques (Rijali, 2019), which included: (1) data reduction (filtering relevant data from interviews and documents), (2) categorization of main themes (planning, implementation, evaluation, branding), and (3) drawing conclusions reflectively based on public relations management and educational branding theory. To maintain data validity, source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various sources (leaders, staff, documents), as well as member checking with informants to ensure the accuracy of the findings (Hasan et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

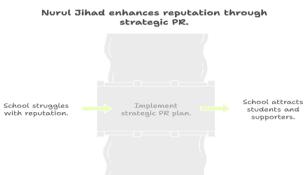
Public Relations Management Planning at Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School

Planning public relations programs is a strategic step to improve the competitiveness of educational institutions, especially madrasas and Islamic boarding schools, amid the challenges of a fast-paced and competitive digital era. Based on observations and interviews with the management of Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School, public relations program planning is divided into two main categories, namely routine work programs and incidental work programs. As stated by one of the boarding school administrators, "In this fast-paced and competitive digital era, we realize the importance of the role of public relations in maintaining and improving the image of the institution. Therefore, we strategically plan our public relations programs. At the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School, public relations programs are divided into two categories, namely routine work programs and incidental work programs." Routine work programs include structured and periodic activities such as publishing madrasah activities,

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liaising with parents and the community, and reporting information through social media. These programs are an important foundation in building a positive image of the institution in a consistent and sustainable manner.

Figure 1.1



Meanwhile, incidental work programs are flexible and responsive to unpredictable situations, such as handling emergencies, visits from important guests, or sudden collaborative activities with external institutions. Based on interviews with the head of the madrasah and public relations staff, decisions regarding these incidental programs are usually made through quick internal discussions while still considering strategic aspects and effective communication. This transformation in public relations strategy demonstrates an important adaptation to the needs of the times, where the speed of information and accuracy of communication are crucial in determining an institution's position amid digital competition. With careful and dynamic planning, the madrasah is able to not only maintain its existence but also enhance its competitiveness as a modern Islamic educational institution open to change.

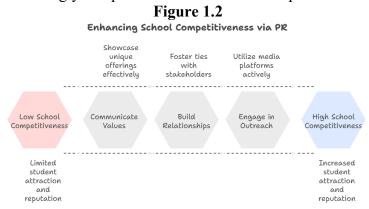
After mapping out the needs, the management strategically sets the objectives of the Public Relations program. The main objective is to disseminate information about Islamic boarding schools as widely as possible to increase public interest in sending their children to madrasahs, as a high number of students is considered an indicator of the institution's existence and quality. In addition, the public relations program is also aimed at building relationships with external parties in order to seek support and assistance for the development of educational facilities. Thus, public relations program planning is not only a communication tool, but also an important strategy in improving competitiveness and service quality at Islamic boarding schools.

Implementation of public relations in improving the competitiveness of Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School

The Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan implements adaptive and contextual public relations management strategies to increase its competitiveness in the digital age. They maintain a formal approach by distributing physical invitations as a form of respect for the community, even though communication technology has developed. The socialization of new student admissions is carried out intensively through social and print media, while the participation of parents is strengthened through the formation of well-organized associations. This is in line with what one of the administrators said: "For the socialization of new student admissions, we use social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and banners in strategic locations. We also create flyers and twibbons to be shared through the official and personal accounts of the teachers." On the other hand, art performances serve as a means of building

emotional bonds between the guardians of the students and the Islamic boarding school. Ultimately, this Islamic boarding school has established international relations with the Japanese Consulate General to obtain support for infrastructure development.

From this overall strategy, we can see a pattern of communication that is collaborative, integrative, and adaptive to technological developments. Pesantren do not simply abandon traditional methods, but combine them with a digital approach to create a professional yet humanistic impression. The public relations strategy implemented is comprehensive, touching all levels: internal institutions, student guardians, the wider community, and even international institutions. This approach shows that the transformation of public relations management is not just about following digital trends, but also optimizing social, cultural, and strategic relationships in order to strengthen the image and competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools in the midst of an increasingly complex era of educational competition.



Evaluation of Community Relations in Improving the Competitiveness of Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School

The Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan conducts evaluations of its public relations program using a systematic approach that remains flexible and adaptive to conditions in the field. The head of the madrasah acts as the main supervisor, not only receiving formal reports from the public relations team, but also being directly involved in observing the implementation of the program. The results of these observations are usually recorded and used as material for discussion in internal meetings with the public relations deputy and the teachers' council. This evaluation does not only focus on the achievement of targets but also pays attention to the dynamics, obstacles, and opportunities that arise during the implementation of the program. In addition, the Islamic boarding school also opens up space for participation by absorbing aspirations from external parties such as student guardians, community leaders, and foundation administrators. One of the administrators said, "We evaluate the implementation of public relations programs periodically, although not always formally. Usually, I record the results of my own observations or based on reports from the deputy head of public relations, then we discuss them in meetings." This participatory approach helps Islamic boarding schools to understand the needs of the wider community and adjust their public relations communication strategies to be relevant to their social environment.

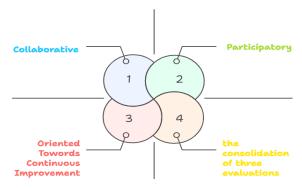
In order to improve the quality of public relations programs and the managerial skills of the internal team, Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School also actively collaborates with madrasah supervisors to carry out human resource development. "We discuss every program, especially those with a significant impact, with the students' guardians, community leaders, and the foundation. Their input is important for future improvements", "In human resource

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development, we work closely with madrasah supervisors. We hold managerial development forums using the FGD method so that all teachers can actively discuss and find solutions together," said a senior teacher. This activity is carried out in the form of a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) that allows teachers and educational staff to discuss openly, share experiences, and find solutions to various obstacles in implementing public relations programs. This coaching model is considered more effective than one-way lectures because it encourages active participation and strengthens collaboration among staff. Through this approach, Islamic boarding schools not only focus on the technical aspects of publication or promotion, but also on strengthening internal capacity as the main foundation for building competitiveness in an ever-evolving digital era. Continuous evaluation and coaching show that these boarding schools are strongly committed to transforming themselves into educational institutions that are adaptive, competitive, and responsive to the challenges of the times.

From these various activities, it is evident that the evaluation of public relations management at Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School is collaborative, participatory, and oriented towards continuous improvement. The evaluation is not only conducted internally by the head of the madrasah, but also involves feedback from the community as users of educational services. The strategy of human resource development through supervision and group discussions strengthens the transformation of a more open and solution-oriented work culture. This pattern reflects that the transformation of public relations management in responding to the challenges of digital competitiveness is not only about technology, but also concerns human capacity building and data-based decision making as well as aspirations.

Figure 1.3
Evaluation Publics Relations
Management at Nurul Jihad
Islamic Boarding School



Discussion

The public relations program planning at Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School demonstrates a strategic understanding of the importance of institutional communication in responding to the dynamics of the digital era. The division of the public relations program into two categories routine and incidental reflects the principles of flexibility and adaptability in communication management. Routine programs such as publishing activities and reporting through social media reflect modern public relations practices that utilize information technology to build a positive image on an ongoing basis (Mun'im; 2024). According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), one of the main functions of public relations is to build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics through strategic and continuous communication (Cutlip et al., 2006). Meanwhile, incidental programs demonstrate an institution's ability to manage crisis communication, which, according to Fearn-Banks

(2011), is an important component of contemporary public relations management, especially in responding to sudden or unexpected issues quickly and measurably. This strategy is particularly relevant in the digital age, when the rapid flow of information requires institutions to have agile and strategic communication responses (Theaker, 2021; Negara, 2021).

Furthermore, public relations planning at Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School does not only focus on conveying information, but also serves as a means to expand social networks and build external legitimacy for the institution. This shows that public relations has transformed from a technical function to a strategic function in institutional management. (Grunig, 1984; Al-Amin, 2024, As'ary, 2016) in their "Two-Way Symmetrical Communication" model emphasize the importance of mutual dialogue between institutions and their publics to build harmonious and mutually understanding relationships. The strategy of increasing the competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools through active publication, strengthening external networks, and delivering targeted programs to the community shows that public relations plays a role as an agent of change that supports overall institutional growth. In this context, the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School has practiced a transformation of public relations management that is not only informative but also proactive, participatory, and relevant to the needs of the times. Mature and dynamic public relations planning is an important key for Islamic educational institutions to not only survive but also grow competitively amid the pressures and challenges of the digital era (Effendy, 2006; Ruslan, 2010; Nely, 2024).

The public relations management strategy implemented by Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jihad reflects a hybrid approach that combines traditional and digital communication maintaining respect through physical invitations, while maximizing modern reach through social media and parent associations. This approach is in line with the integrative concept in public relations practice that combines paid, earned, shared, and owned media as described in the PESO (Paid, Earned, Shared, Owned) model by Dietrich (2014) and reviewed by Ghidotti Communications (2023) WikipediaGhidotti Communications. By blending classical and digital methods, Islamic boarding schools not only maintain credibility through traditional media but also leverage the advantages of digital speed and engagement to uphold a professional yet humanistic image (InkbotDesign, 2023; Mugni, 2024). Furthermore, the collaborative, integrative, and adaptive communication patterns established by Islamic boarding schools demonstrate the transformation of public relations functions as agents of social and institutional change. Grunig and Hunt's (2018) two-way symmetrical communication model, which emphasizes two-way dialogue to build mutually beneficial relationships, is evident in the practice of organizing art performances, dialogues with students' guardians, and international cooperation with the Consulate General of Japan pressbooks.pub. In addition, the integration of traditional and digital media in institutional communications strengthens the overall reputation of the institution in line with findings that organizations that combine old and new media are more effective in overcoming communication barriers and building reputation (Olanrewaju Awoyemi et al., 2023)

The Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School implements systematic and adaptive public relations program evaluation, combining direct observation by the head of the madrasah with formal reports from the public relations team (Rolos, 2020; Muhibbulloh, 2021; Albert, 2016). This approach is in line with the principles of modern formative evaluation, which emphasizes continuous feedback so that program improvements can be made immediately (feedback in use) and foster continuous learning (Sankaran & Low, 2025; Nasution, 2024) In addition, the institution also involves parents and community leaders in the evaluation process, reflecting the principles of collaborative evaluation and social relevance initiated by the participatory

evaluation model, which emphasizes the involvement of all stakeholders to improve the quality and acceptability of the program (Participatory Evaluation (Pe) Mandakini Pant, n.d.).

In developing internal capacity, the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School held a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with madrasah supervisors to develop human resources. This collaborative learning strategy has proven effective in improving the competence and involvement of team members, as demonstrated in the implementation of FGDs in student competency learning, which resulted in improved learning outcomes (Widiyati, 2022). This is consistent with contemporary learning organization theory, which emphasizes the importance of open dialogue and collaboration as a means of adapting to the challenges of the digital age, strengthening institutional capabilities through reflective and participatory practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis results, the public relations program planning at Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School demonstrates strategic understanding by combining routine and incidental programs that are flexible and adaptive in responding to the digital era. The hybrid approach that combines traditional and digital communication, in accordance with the PESO model and the principle of two-way symmetrical communication, strengthens the reciprocal relationship between the institution and the public. Program evaluation is conducted systematically and participatively, involving internal and external parties, in line with formative and participatory evaluation theory. Human resource development through Focus Group Discussions encourages collaboration and improves internal capabilities. This transformation of public relations management focuses not only on technology but also on human capacity building, making the boarding school more adaptive, competitive, and relevant amid the challenges of digital era communication.

This paper's main strength lies in its integration of contemporary public relations communication theory with actual practice at the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School, providing a comprehensive overview of adaptive and strategic public relations management. The use of various theoretical references, such as the two-way symmetrical communication model, formative evaluation, and the integrative media concept (PESO), strengthens the analysis and credibility of the paper. The holistic approach, which combines traditional and digital communication and the active participation of various stakeholders, confirms the relevance and sustainability of public relations strategies. In addition, the focus on human resource development adds an important dimension to institutional transformation that is innovative and responsive to the challenges of the digital age.

The limitations of this paper lie in the lack of quantitative data to measure the effectiveness of the public relations strategies implemented, resulting in a more descriptive and qualitative analysis. Furthermore, this study is too focused on a single case study, namely the Nurul Jihad Islamic Boarding School, thus limiting its generalizability to other Islamic boarding schools with different characteristics. The explanation of the indicators of success of the public relations program has also not been systematically elaborated. In addition, the involvement of external actors such as the mass media and local government has not been discussed in depth, even though both play an important role in building the image and competitiveness of educational institutions in the digital era.

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