

Marketing Innovation as a Strategic Approach to Increasing Customer Preference in *Pesantren*-Based Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the forms of educational marketing innovation implemented in Islamic Boarding Schools, to examine the challenges faced in their implementation, and to identify their impact on customer preferences. *Pesantren* are no longer viewed solely as traditional religious institutions but are also required to develop adaptive and innovative marketing strategies to remain relevant and competitive in the era of modernization and digital transformation. This study employed a qualitative approach using a multi-case study design. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation at both *pesantren*. The data were analyzed thematically by comparing patterns of marketing innovation and customer preferences across the research sites. The findings reveal that both *pesantren* have implemented various marketing innovations, including the utilization of social media for promotion, strengthening institutional narratives and branding, adopting the Merdeka Curriculum-based educational system, and involving alumni as promotional agents. However, several challenges were identified, such as limited human resources, resistance to organizational change, and digital disparities among administrators. Despite these obstacles, the marketing innovations positively influenced customer preferences, as indicated by increased student enrollment and stronger public trust in the institutions.

Keywords: *Pesantren*-Based Education;; Marketing Innovation, Customer Preference, Educational Marketing

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital communication technology has significantly transformed the landscape of educational management and institutional promotion across various educational sectors (Alam et al., 2021; Pettersson, 2021), including Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren*. Educational institutions are increasingly required to adapt to technological changes because modern society relies heavily on online information and digital interaction in making educational decisions. In many countries, digital marketing has become an important strategy for strengthening institutional visibility, improving communication effectiveness, and building public trust in educational services (Malesev & Cherry, 2021). However, *pesantren* as traditional Islamic educational institutions often face challenges in balancing modernization and the preservation of religious identity. The social reality indicates that many *pesantren* still depend on conventional communication patterns such as interpersonal networks, religious gatherings, and word-of-mouth promotion, despite the growing influence of digital media in shaping public perception (Chaudhari & Bhornya, 2022; Mundiri et al., 2021). This condition creates a significant gap between the

theoretical expectation that educational institutions should adopt adaptive communication systems and the factual reality that some *pesantren* remain limited in utilizing digital platforms effectively. In addition, competition among educational institutions has increased the urgency for *pesantren* to strengthen institutional branding and communication responsiveness. Therefore, the transformation of communication strategies in *pesantren*-based education has become an important issue requiring deeper academic investigation and contextual understanding.

Digital marketing and institutional branding are often associated with organizational adaptability, communication effectiveness, and public trust development within educational management studies (Berdiieva & Goroshko, 2022; Doyle et al., 2022; Robson, 2021). Institutional visibility in digital environments contributes positively to organizational legitimacy because audiences increasingly evaluate institutions through online interactions and publicly accessible information (Ghufron et al., 2023; Walid & Malik, 2023). Furthermore, branding theory emphasizes that institutional image is shaped not only by visual identity but also by communication transparency, responsiveness, and consistency in presenting organizational values. Educational marketing literature additionally highlights the importance of stakeholder participation, including alumni involvement, in supporting institutional reputation and sustainability. However, several studies indicate that traditional educational institutions often experience difficulties integrating modern communication practices into their organizational culture (Arqoub, 2023; Bustos, 2021; LASKIN, 2023). The literature also reveals that digital transformation in Islamic educational institutions remains uneven because institutional readiness, technological literacy, and communication management capacities differ significantly across contexts.

Pesantren historically function as Islamic educational centers emphasizing religious learning, moral development, and community-based education. Their institutional legitimacy traditionally emerged from religious authority, kyai leadership, and social trust within local communities (Ayubayeva et al., 2022; Bossman, 2021). However, contemporary social changes have altered communication patterns and public expectations regarding educational transparency and accessibility. Parents and prospective students now seek educational information through social media platforms, institutional websites, and online communication channels before making educational decisions. This transformation has encouraged *pesantren* to reconsider conventional promotional approaches and adopt more technology-oriented communication strategies (Barrot, 2022; Sule & Sulaiman, 2021). Nevertheless, the adaptation process is not always straightforward because *pesantren* must maintain religious values while simultaneously responding to modern communication trends.

Educational institutions today are not only evaluated based on academic quality but are also assessed through communication responsiveness, public interaction, and organizational transparency. In *pesantren* contexts, this transformation creates unique challenges because institutional identity is deeply connected to religious traditions, collective values, and moral authority. Digital communication practices may strengthen institutional visibility, but they can also create tensions between modernization and traditional educational culture (Aziz et al., 2022; Saleh et al., 2022; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). Furthermore, alumni networks have emerged as important communication agents capable of influencing public perceptions regarding educational quality and institutional credibility. Alumni experiences, testimonials, and social contributions frequently become references for prospective students and parents in evaluating *pesantren* education. The study therefore investigates how *pesantren* integrate digital marketing and alumni engagement into broader institutional communication strategies. The research additionally examines the role of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and institutional websites in shaping communication effectiveness and educational promotion.

The digital marketing improved institutional visibility and strengthened student recruitment strategies in Islamic schools (Ach & Abdullah, 2022; Ghufron et al., 2023; Musyarapah et al., 2023). Purwanto and Wafa (2023) emphasized that communication responsiveness positively influenced public trust in educational organizations. Chaudhari and Bhornya (2022) explained that social media utilization contributed to stronger stakeholder engagement in communication practices. Maulidia (2023) identified that transparency in educational communication enhanced institutional legitimacy and public perception. Buyamin (2022) revealed that institutional branding strategies significantly affected organizational competitiveness in modern educational environments. (Falah et al., 2023) argued that alumni networks functioned as effective social capital in strengthening educational reputation and institutional sustainability. Naufal et al. (2023) further demonstrated that interactive communication through digital platforms increased audience participation and institutional credibility.

Existing studies predominantly examine modern schools and universities, while traditional Islamic educational institutions receive comparatively limited scholarly attention regarding digital transformation and institutional branding practices. In addition, previous research generally focuses on single dimensions such as social media utilization or educational marketing without comprehensively analyzing the interconnected role of alumni engagement, institutional branding, and digital communication strategies. This limitation creates a theoretical and empirical gap because *pesantren* possess distinctive organizational cultures shaped by religious authority, communal values, and traditional educational systems. Moreover, prior studies rarely investigate how *pesantren* balance modernization through digital communication while maintaining institutional authenticity and Islamic educational identity. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative analysis of digital marketing utilization, responsive institutional branding, and alumni engagement as interconnected communication strategies within *pesantren* educational management.

This study aims to examine how *pesantren*-based educational institutions utilize digital marketing, develop institutional branding strategies, and engage alumni networks in strengthening educational promotion and public trust at Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding school. The study additionally focuses on understanding the interaction between traditional educational values and modern communication practices in *pesantren* contexts. By examining these issues, the research intends to provide a broader explanation regarding the communication strategies adopted by *pesantren* in maintaining institutional competitiveness and public trust. Therefore, the study emphasizes the importance of analyzing educational communication not only as promotional activity but also as an adaptive organizational process influenced by technological, cultural, and social factors.

This study contributes original insights to the development of educational management, communication studies, and Islamic educational research by presenting an integrative analysis of digital marketing, institutional branding, and alumni engagement within *pesantren*-based education. The research argues that communication transformation in *pesantren* is not merely technological adaptation but also a strategic organizational response to changing public expectations and educational competition. This argument is based on the assumption that communication effectiveness increasingly determines public trust and institutional competitiveness in contemporary educational environments. Furthermore, the research proposes that alumni engagement functions as a form of social capital strengthening institutional branding through authentic experiences and interpersonal communication networks. The originality of this study also lies in its contextual focus on *pesantren*, which combines traditional Islamic educational values with modern communication practices.

RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study focuses on *pesantren*-based educational institutions that actively utilize digital communication platforms as part of their educational marketing and institutional branding strategies at Nurul Jadid. This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to explore communication transformation and educational marketing practices within *pesantren*-based institutions. The qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand social interactions, communication patterns, institutional experiences, and the meanings constructed by participants in their natural settings (Oliveira, 2023). The case study design enabled researchers to examine the complexity of digital communication practices, institutional branding strategies, and alumni engagement within specific *pesantren* contexts in greater depth. Through this methodological approach, the research was able to generate comprehensive and contextual explanations regarding the transformation of educational communication within *pesantren*.

The sources of information in this study consisted of respondents, informants, and institutional texts related to educational communication and digital marketing practices within *pesantren*. Informants included *pesantren* leaders, media administrators, teachers, alumni, parents, and students who were directly involved in institutional communication and promotional activities. These participants were selected purposively based on their knowledge, experiences, and involvement in digital communication management and educational branding practices. In addition, institutional documents such as promotional materials, website content, social media posts, online announcements, and alumni testimonials were utilized as supporting textual data. Data collection processes were conducted through desk review, observation, interviews, and documentation techniques. Desk review activities involved analyzing institutional documents, digital communication content, and previous research relevant to educational marketing and branding. Observations were conducted to examine communication activities, online interactions, and institutional promotional practices within *pesantren* environments. Semi-structured interviews were carried out using interview guidelines to obtain detailed information regarding communication strategies, branding implementation, and alumni engagement. Researchers also utilized note-taking techniques and documentation tools during fieldwork to strengthen data validity and contextual understanding.

The data analysis process in this study employed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification (Stough & Lee, 2021). Data reduction was conducted by selecting, categorizing, and simplifying information obtained from interviews, observations, and institutional documents according to the research focus. Researchers organized the data into thematic categories related to digital marketing utilization, institutional branding, and alumni engagement within *pesantren* educational management. The next stage involved data display, where the reduced data were systematically presented in narrative descriptions, matrices, and thematic interpretations to facilitate analytical understanding and pattern identification. The final stage involved conclusion drawing and verification through continuous interpretation and cross-checking of data sources to ensure consistency and validity of findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Marketing Utilization in *Pesantren*-Based Education

The first finding of this study demonstrates that *pesantren*-based educational institutions have increasingly utilized digital marketing platforms to strengthen institutional visibility and public engagement. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, as well as

institutional websites, were actively employed to introduce educational programs, religious activities, student achievements, and institutional values to broader audiences. The use of digital media was not merely intended for promotional purposes but also functioned as a communication bridge between *pesantren* and society. Through attractive visual content, short educational videos, online brochures, and regular information updates, *pesantren* attempted to present a modern and adaptive institutional image while maintaining Islamic educational principles. The findings further indicate that digital marketing practices enabled *pesantren* to reach prospective students and parents beyond their immediate geographical area. This strategy also allowed *pesantren* administrators to disseminate information efficiently and respond quickly to public inquiries. In addition, digital platforms became instruments for strengthening institutional credibility because audiences could directly observe educational activities and management transparency. Therefore, the integration of digital marketing in *pesantren* education reflects an adaptive transformation in educational management that aligns with the communication patterns of contemporary society while preserving the religious identity of the institution.

The observational findings revealed that the implementation of digital marketing in *pesantren* was carried out systematically through various forms of online communication. Researchers observed that Instagram accounts were consistently updated with visual documentation of daily student activities, religious ceremonies, academic competitions, and extracurricular programs. YouTube channels were utilized to upload promotional videos, virtual tours, religious lectures, and documentation of *pesantren* events. WhatsApp groups and broadcast features functioned as practical communication tools for disseminating announcements and maintaining relationships with parents and alumni. Furthermore, institutional websites contained profiles, admission procedures, curriculum information, and news regarding institutional achievements. The observations also showed that *pesantren* administrators assigned specific staff members to manage digital communication, indicating the institutional seriousness in maintaining online visibility. The visual presentation of content reflected efforts to combine professionalism with Islamic values, as shown through modest design elements, religious messages, and educational narratives. Researchers additionally identified that audience engagement occurred through comments, direct messages, and online interactions, suggesting that digital platforms created interactive communication spaces between *pesantren* and society. Consequently, the observational evidence confirms that digital marketing has become an integral component of *pesantren* educational promotion and institutional communication strategies.

Table 1. Digital Marketing Strategic

Digital Platform	Main Function	Forms of Content	Communication Target
Instagram	Institutional promotion	Student activities, achievements, posters	Prospective students and public
YouTube	Audiovisual dissemination	Religious lectures, virtual tours, events	Wider online audience
WhatsApp	Direct communication	Announcements, information sharing	Parents, alumni, students
Institutional Website	Formal information center	Admission details, curriculum, profiles	Public and stakeholders

Table 1 illustrates how each platform was used to support educational promotion, communication, and institutional branding activities within the *pesantren* environment. Through this visualization, it becomes evident that digital platforms served different yet interconnected communication functions. Instagram was mainly used for visual promotion and public interaction, while YouTube emphasized audiovisual documentation and educational dissemination. WhatsApp functioned as a direct communication medium between administrators, parents, and students.

Institutional websites provided formal information regarding academic programs, institutional history, and admission services. In addition, the table demonstrates that digital marketing activities were integrated into the broader management strategy of *pesantren*. The combination of multiple platforms strengthened communication effectiveness and expanded institutional outreach to diverse audiences. The findings also indicate that *pesantren* adopted communication approaches that were responsive to technological developments without abandoning their traditional educational values.

Digital marketing utilization indicate that *pesantren* have transformed their communication patterns from conventional approaches toward more technology-oriented strategies. Previously, *pesantren* promotion depended heavily on face-to-face interaction, community networks, and printed materials. However, the research findings demonstrate that digital platforms now function as strategic tools for expanding institutional influence and attracting public attention. The integration of social media and websites reflects an organizational awareness that educational competition increasingly depends on visibility, accessibility, and communication responsiveness. This transformation also illustrates the institutional capacity of *pesantren* to adapt to social and technological change while maintaining religious values and educational identity. Furthermore, the findings reveal that digital communication contributes to institutional trust because audiences can directly observe educational practices, student discipline, and *pesantren* activities through online platforms. The use of digital marketing additionally encourages two-way interaction, enabling *pesantren* to respond to questions, feedback, and public expectations more effectively. These findings suggest that digitalization is not only related to technological adoption but also connected to institutional modernization in educational management. Therefore, the research interprets digital marketing as a strategic communication innovation that strengthens *pesantren* competitiveness within the contemporary educational landscape.

Digital marketing has become an essential strategy in *pesantren*-based educational promotion and institutional communication. The utilization of Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and institutional websites demonstrates that *pesantren* are increasingly aware of the importance of digital presence in shaping public perception and attracting prospective students. The findings further indicate that digital communication practices strengthen transparency, accessibility, and institutional credibility. Through consistent online engagement, *pesantren* are able to maintain relationships with parents, alumni, and broader society while simultaneously promoting educational achievements and religious activities. The integration of digital media also reflects the institutional adaptation of *pesantren* to the communication behavior of modern society, which is increasingly dependent on online information. Moreover, the study reveals that digital marketing does not diminish the traditional identity of *pesantren*; instead, it serves as a medium for presenting Islamic educational values in more accessible and contemporary forms. The use of multiple digital platforms additionally broadens institutional reach beyond local communities and creates opportunities for stronger public participation. Consequently, the general conclusion of this finding is that digital marketing functions not only as a promotional instrument but also as a strategic mechanism for institutional transformation, communication effectiveness, and educational sustainability within *pesantren*-based education.

Institutional Branding Strategies in Building *Pesantren* Image

The *pesantren* implemented institutional branding strategies through responsive communication, transparency, and active interaction with audiences on social media platforms. Branding activities were designed to create a positive institutional image that reflected educational quality, religious values, and organizational professionalism. The findings indicate that *pesantren*

administrators recognized the importance of maintaining public trust in the increasingly competitive educational environment. Consequently, communication practices were conducted openly by providing clear information regarding educational programs, student activities, institutional achievements, and administrative procedures. Social media platforms became strategic tools for presenting institutional identity in a more interactive and accessible manner. The study also found that branding strategies were closely connected to audience engagement because *pesantren* actively responded to comments, questions, and feedback from parents and the public. This responsiveness contributed to perceptions of transparency and institutional accountability. In addition, branding was strengthened through consistent visual identity, positive narratives, and the presentation of religious and educational values in online communication. The integration of these elements allowed *pesantren* to position themselves as modern Islamic educational institutions that remained rooted in traditional religious principles. Therefore, institutional branding emerged as a strategic communication approach for strengthening public confidence and enhancing the competitiveness of *pesantren* education.

The interview findings further support the implementation of institutional branding strategies in *pesantren*-based education. One *pesantren* administrator explained, "We consistently update our social media because parents today want quick and transparent information regarding student activities and institutional programs." Another informant stated, "Public trust grows when the institution responds actively to questions and criticisms through digital platforms." A teacher responsible for media management also mentioned, "Branding is not only about promotion but about presenting the real identity of the *pesantren* through honest communication and educational values." These interview statements demonstrate that branding practices were understood as long-term efforts to establish credibility and maintain positive relationships with society. The interviews additionally revealed that administrators intentionally created communication policies emphasizing openness, responsiveness, and professionalism. Parents interviewed during the study also expressed appreciation for the accessibility of information provided by *pesantren* through online platforms. They considered active communication as evidence of institutional responsibility and transparency. Furthermore, the interviews showed that branding strategies were continuously evaluated to ensure consistency between online representation and actual institutional conditions. Consequently, the analysis of interview findings confirms that responsive communication and transparency significantly contributed to strengthening the *pesantren* image in the public sphere.

The research findings concerning institutional branding strategies can be restated as evidence that *pesantren* increasingly prioritize communication quality and audience engagement in building institutional image. Branding activities were not limited to visual promotion but involved broader organizational efforts to maintain trust, transparency, and communication responsiveness. Through active social media interaction, *pesantren* attempted to reduce communication barriers between administrators and society. The findings indicate that institutional image was constructed through the consistency of messages, responsiveness to public inquiries, and openness in presenting institutional activities. Moreover, branding strategies reflected the awareness that modern educational institutions are evaluated not only through academic achievement but also through communication professionalism and public relations management. The use of digital platforms enabled *pesantren* to create continuous interaction with audiences and strengthen emotional connections with parents, alumni, and prospective students. These findings also demonstrate that transparency functions as an important factor in enhancing institutional legitimacy and public confidence. Therefore, the restatement of this finding emphasizes that *pesantren* branding strategies involve integrated communication practices that combine institutional identity, responsiveness, and transparency to establish a positive and sustainable

educational image within society.

Institutional branding in *pesantren* education represents a significant transformation in educational communication management. Traditionally, *pesantren* relied heavily on community reputation and religious authority to attract students. However, the current findings indicate that institutional legitimacy increasingly depends on communication effectiveness, digital visibility, and public engagement. Responsive communication reflects organizational adaptability to contemporary social expectations, where audiences demand faster access to information and greater transparency. The study also interprets transparency as a strategic mechanism for building institutional trust and minimizing public uncertainty regarding educational quality and administrative practices. Furthermore, active interaction on social media creates opportunities for participatory communication, allowing society to feel more connected with institutional activities. This interaction strengthens emotional attachment and contributes to the development of a positive institutional reputation. The findings additionally indicate that branding strategies are closely related to organizational professionalism because institutions consciously manage their public image through planned communication activities. Consequently, the interpretation of this finding highlights that institutional branding in *pesantren* is not merely promotional activity but a strategic process of constructing credibility, trust, and institutional identity in the digital era.

Institutional branding strategies play a crucial role in strengthening the public image of *pesantren*-based educational institutions. Responsive communication, transparency, and active audience interaction emerged as the primary elements supporting positive institutional perception. The findings demonstrate that *pesantren* have adapted to the demands of contemporary communication by integrating digital engagement into educational management practices. Branding activities further contribute to institutional credibility because audiences can directly observe educational processes, student activities, and organizational openness through online platforms. In addition, transparent communication strengthens public trust and encourages stronger relationships between *pesantren* and stakeholders. The study also reveals that branding strategies enable *pesantren* to position themselves competitively within the broader educational environment while maintaining Islamic educational values and traditional identity. Through consistent communication practices, *pesantren* can build sustainable public confidence and reinforce institutional legitimacy. Therefore, the general conclusion of this finding is that institutional branding functions as an essential strategy for developing trust, strengthening communication effectiveness, and enhancing the long-term reputation of *pesantren*-based education in contemporary society.

Alumni Engagement as a Promotional Network in Educational Marketing

Alumni engagement played a significant role as a promotional network in *pesantren* educational marketing. Alumni actively contributed to disseminating positive testimonials, sharing educational experiences, and introducing *pesantren* to wider audiences through social media platforms and community interactions. The findings demonstrate that alumni were considered valuable institutional assets because their experiences and achievements reflected the credibility of the *pesantren* educational system. Through online communication, alumni frequently shared memories, motivational narratives, and recommendations related to the institution, which indirectly functioned as promotional content. The study also found that *pesantren* administrators maintained communication with alumni networks to strengthen institutional relationships and encourage alumni participation in promotional activities. Alumni engagement was not only limited to online interaction but also included participation in institutional events, educational seminars, and community programs. Furthermore, alumni testimonials were perceived by society as more

authentic and trustworthy compared to formal promotional materials produced by institutions. This authenticity strengthened public confidence because prospective students and parents could observe real educational outcomes through alumni experiences. Therefore, alumni engagement emerged as an effective communication strategy that supported *pesantren* marketing while simultaneously reinforcing institutional identity and long-term social relationships within the community.

Observational findings revealed that alumni engagement activities were visible in both online and offline institutional communication practices. Researchers observed that many alumni voluntarily reposted *pesantren* activities on Instagram and Facebook while also sharing personal experiences related to their educational journey. Some alumni uploaded short videos discussing the values, discipline, and learning atmosphere they experienced during their time in the *pesantren*. In addition, alumni were frequently invited to institutional events such as graduation ceremonies, religious gatherings, and student motivation programs. These activities strengthened emotional attachment between alumni and the institution while simultaneously promoting the *pesantren* image to broader audiences. Researchers also identified that alumni networks functioned as informal communication channels connecting *pesantren* with local communities and prospective students. During observations, several parents acknowledged that recommendations from alumni influenced their decision to enroll their children in the *pesantren*. The findings further showed that alumni participation contributed to the continuity of institutional reputation because their professional achievements and social involvement reflected positively on the educational quality of the *pesantren*. Consequently, the observational evidence confirms that alumni engagement served as a strategic promotional network capable of strengthening educational marketing and public trust simultaneously.

Table 2. Alumni Engagement Aspect

Forms of Alumni Engagement	Main Activities	Communication Impact
Social Media Testimonials	Sharing experiences and achievements	Strengthening institutional image
Participation in Events	Seminars, graduations, gatherings	Building emotional attachment
Community Recommendations	Introducing <i>pesantren</i> to society	Expanding promotional networks
Alumni Achievements	Professional and social contributions	Enhancing institutional credibility

Table 2 illustrates the forms of alumni engagement identified during the research process. The visualization demonstrates that alumni contributed to educational marketing through various communication activities that supported institutional promotion and public trust. Social media testimonials functioned as digital promotion by presenting personal educational experiences and institutional values. Alumni participation in institutional events strengthened emotional relationships between graduates and the *pesantren* community. Community recommendations enabled *pesantren* to reach prospective students through interpersonal communication networks. Furthermore, alumni achievements in professional and social fields indirectly enhanced institutional reputation because they represented successful educational outcomes. The table also indicates that alumni engagement combined formal and informal communication patterns, creating broader institutional influence within society. These findings demonstrate that alumni networks are not only symbolic institutional relationships but also strategic resources in educational promotion and branding activities. Therefore, the visualization below supports the conclusion that alumni engagement contributes significantly to strengthening *pesantren* visibility, institutional legitimacy, and public confidence in educational quality.

Alumni engagement can be restated as evidence that alumni function as influential communication agents within *pesantren* educational marketing. Their active participation in sharing

experiences and promoting institutional values demonstrates that alumni relationships extend beyond graduation and continue to contribute to institutional development. The findings also indicate that alumni testimonials possess persuasive power because they are perceived as authentic reflections of educational quality and student experience. Through digital communication platforms, alumni are able to reach broader audiences and influence public perceptions regarding *pesantren* education. Furthermore, alumni engagement strengthens institutional continuity because graduates remain connected to the *pesantren* community and contribute to maintaining institutional reputation. The interpretation of these findings suggests that alumni networks represent forms of social capital that can support educational sustainability and institutional competitiveness. Alumni involvement additionally reflects the success of *pesantren* in building long-term emotional relationships with graduates. Consequently, the findings emphasize that educational marketing in *pesantren* is not solely dependent on institutional communication but is also reinforced through alumni participation, community trust, and interpersonal communication networks that develop organically within society.

Alumni engagement serves as an important promotional network in *pesantren*-based educational marketing. Alumni actively contribute to strengthening institutional image through testimonials, social media communication, community recommendations, and participation in institutional activities. The findings reveal that alumni networks function as strategic communication resources capable of expanding institutional outreach and enhancing public trust. Through authentic narratives and personal experiences, alumni provide persuasive evidence regarding the educational quality and values implemented within *pesantren*. The study additionally demonstrates that alumni engagement strengthens emotional attachment between graduates and institutions, contributing to the sustainability of institutional reputation over time. Furthermore, alumni participation supports educational branding because successful graduates become representations of *pesantren* educational outcomes within society. The integration of alumni networks into educational marketing strategies also indicates that *pesantren* recognize the importance of social relationships and community trust in institutional development. Therefore, the general conclusion of this finding is that alumni engagement functions not only as social interaction but also as a strategic mechanism for strengthening communication effectiveness, institutional legitimacy, and the long-term sustainability of *pesantren*-based education in the contemporary educational environment.

Discussion

The digital marketing in *pesantren*-based education demonstrates significant implications for institutional communication effectiveness and educational promotion. The integration of Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and institutional websites enabled *pesantren* to strengthen public accessibility to information and broaden institutional visibility. Digital marketing practices functioned as strategic communication instruments that facilitated interaction between *pesantren* and society in a faster and more flexible manner. This condition contributed positively to institutional competitiveness because prospective students and parents could obtain educational information without geographical limitations. Educational institutions utilizing digital communication platforms experienced increased public engagement and stronger institutional recognition (Karim et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). In addition, digital marketing improved transparency because institutional activities, programs, and student achievements became publicly accessible through online platforms. However, the findings also indicate potential dysfunctions related to the dependence on digital visibility, where institutions may prioritize online image over substantive educational quality if communication management is not balanced properly.

The underlying structure behind the successful implementation of digital marketing in *pesantren* education is closely related to technological adaptation, organizational responsiveness, and changes in public communication behavior. The findings indicate that *pesantren* were able to adopt digital platforms because institutional administrators recognized that contemporary society increasingly depends on online information for educational decision-making. This transformation reflects a structural shift in communication patterns from conventional face-to-face interaction toward digital engagement. Educational institutions adopting digital communication strategies generally possess adaptive leadership structures and flexible organizational cultures that support innovation (Asror et al., 2023; Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022; Williams & Tierney, 2023). The findings further suggest that digital marketing effectiveness is influenced by the availability of human resources capable of managing online communication professionally. Several *pesantren* appointed specific media administrators responsible for content creation and audience interaction, indicating institutional awareness of communication specialization. In addition, the rapid spread of internet access and smartphone usage strengthened the relationship between *pesantren* and online audiences.

The second finding concerning institutional branding strategies demonstrates important implications for the development of public trust and institutional legitimacy in *pesantren*-based education. Responsive communication, transparency, and active audience interaction contributed significantly to strengthening positive institutional image. These practices functioned as mechanisms for reducing communication barriers between *pesantren* and society while simultaneously increasing institutional credibility. Public accessibility to information regarding educational activities, student programs, and administrative procedures created perceptions of accountability and professionalism. Transparent communication positively influences public confidence in educational institutions (Lauren, 2023). Furthermore, active interaction through social media strengthened emotional relationships between *pesantren* and stakeholders, particularly parents and prospective students. The findings indicate that institutional branding was not limited to visual identity but also included communication ethics and organizational openness.

The relationship between responsive communication and positive institutional branding is strongly influenced by organizational structure, leadership orientation, and the increasing expectations of society regarding transparency. The findings indicate that *pesantren* adopting open communication patterns generally possess more adaptive leadership systems capable of responding quickly to public inquiries and feedback. This responsiveness creates perceptions of professionalism and strengthens institutional legitimacy in the public sphere. Communication transparency in educational institutions often emerges from leadership cultures emphasizing participation, accountability, and organizational openness (Leithwood, 2021). The study further suggests that social media platforms structurally encourage institutions to maintain continuous communication because audiences expect rapid responses and updated information.

The third finding regarding alumni engagement as a promotional network demonstrates important implications for institutional sustainability and educational marketing effectiveness. Alumni participation in sharing testimonials, promoting *pesantren* activities, and recommending institutions to society strengthened public confidence in *pesantren* education. Alumni engagement functioned as a form of social capital because graduates acted as communication agents connecting institutions with wider communities. Alumni testimonials were perceived as more authentic compared to formal institutional advertisements because they reflected direct personal experiences (Drezner & Levy, 2021). This authenticity increased public trust and influenced parental decision-making regarding educational choices. However, there are potential dysfunctions when alumni engagement becomes highly dependent on selective success narratives that may not fully

represent institutional realities. Alumni engagement provides substantial benefits for promotional activities and institutional legitimacy, although it requires balanced representation to ensure that institutional communication remains credible, inclusive, and reflective of diverse alumni experiences.

The structural factors underlying alumni engagement in *pesantren* educational marketing are closely connected to emotional attachment, social networks, and institutional culture. The findings indicate that alumni remained actively involved because *pesantren* successfully developed long-term social relationships and collective identity during students' educational experiences. Strong interpersonal interactions between teachers, students, and religious communities created emotional bonds that continued after graduation. Alumni engagement in Islamic educational institutions is often influenced by cultural values emphasizing solidarity, loyalty, and collective responsibility (Al Rasyid & Kamaluddin, 2024). Alumni networks become more active when institutions intentionally maintain communication channels and provide opportunities for alumni participation (Sulaiman & Yanasari, 2022). Consequently, the relationship between institutional culture, emotional attachment, and communication technology explains the effectiveness of alumni engagement as a strategic promotional network. This structural relationship demonstrates that alumni participation is not merely spontaneous social interaction but also the result of institutional environments that successfully cultivate long-term loyalty and community-based educational identity.

The practical and theoretical implications of this study demonstrate that digital communication, institutional branding, and alumni engagement have become interconnected components in contemporary *pesantren* educational management. Practically, the findings provide guidance for *pesantren* administrators to strengthen communication strategies through the integration of digital platforms, transparent branding practices, and sustainable alumni networks. Educational institutions are encouraged to develop professional communication management systems that maintain balance between promotional activities and educational substance. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of educational management and communication theories by demonstrating how Islamic educational institutions adapt modern promotional strategies while maintaining religious identity and traditional values. This study expands discussions regarding social capital and organizational communication within *pesantren*-based education by emphasizing the strategic role of alumni and digital engagement in strengthening institutional sustainability. Therefore, the study contributes both practically and theoretically to understanding the transformation of educational communication and marketing strategies in contemporary Islamic educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

this study shows that digital marketing, institutional branding, and alumni engagement play significant roles in strengthening the image, communication effectiveness, and public trust of *pesantren*-based educational institutions. The main lesson from this research is that *pesantren* are able to adapt to digital transformation while maintaining Islamic educational values and traditional identity. This study contributes academically by offering an integrative perspective that connects digital communication, branding strategies, and alumni networks within Islamic educational management using a qualitative case study approach. However, the research is limited to specific *pesantren* contexts and a limited range of participants and institutional settings. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve broader locations, more diverse participant characteristics, and quantitative or mixed-method approaches to produce more comprehensive findings that can support effective educational communication policies and institutional development strategies.

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