



Optimization of Social Media Management in Enhancing the Brand Image of Islamic Boarding Schools

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the role of social media optimization in enhancing the brand image of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). With the rapid growth of digital communication, social media has become a critical tool for educational institutions to engage with their audience and improve their public perception. Social media plays a vital role in brand identity creation, with professional social media management, structured content strategies, and platform-specific engagement being key factors in achieving successful branding. Using a multi site approach, the study combined observational data and interviews with social media admins from two pesantren, PP. Al-Mashduqiah and PP. Asy-Syarify. The findings revealed that professional social media admins significantly contribute to maintaining a positive public image, that a structured content strategy is crucial for consistent engagement, and that different platforms are more effective for targeting specific audience segments. This research contributes to the understanding of how religious institutions can leverage social media for branding, particularly in a competitive educational landscape. Recommendations include investing in professional social media management, adopting structured content planning, and tailoring content to specific platforms for optimal reach.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of communication technologies has revolutionized the way institutions manage their public image, particularly in the context of educational institutions. Social media, a cornerstone of contemporary communication, has become a primary platform for branding and engagement, shifting the paradigm from traditional media to more interactive, real-time platforms (Agus et al., 2021; Maulidia, 2023; Quach et al., 2022). This shift is

particularly pronounced in Indonesia, where social media usage has seen exponential growth. Educational institutions, including pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), are increasingly leveraging these platforms to establish a robust public image (Haddade et al., 2024; Munawwaroh & Rahayu, 2024; Saputra et al., 2023). Historically, pesantren have focused on providing religious-based education, yet the current era demands they engage with the digital world to stay relevant and competitive. This research delves into the phenomenon of social media optimization in pesantren, aiming to explore how these institutions utilize social media to enhance their brand image and appeal to a wider audience.

Social media's role in enhancing an institution's brand image is well-documented in communication science. Research has highlighted the transformation in communication practices, where social media platforms have surpassed traditional media in terms of engagement and reach (Lee et al., 2022; Shoaib et al., 2023). Social media's influence on public relations and branding is evident, with institutions utilizing these platforms for advertising, identity building, and engaging with audiences (Ansori et al., 2023; Farwati, 2024). Social media facilitates the creation of brand identity through content production and audience interaction (Saharani & Diana, 2024). This phenomenon is especially relevant to pesantren, where a strong brand image can significantly impact student enrollment and institutional credibility. The ability of pesantren to optimize social media usage to build a positive brand image becomes crucial in navigating the competitive educational landscape.

The social facts surrounding social media use in Indonesia are striking. According to data from We Are Social and Hootsuite, the number of global social media users rose by 10.1% in 2022, with Indonesia ranking third globally in average daily time spent on social media—3 hours and 22 minutes. This trend highlights the growing role of social media as a primary tool for communication, including in the education sector (Hillman, 2023). The increase in internet penetration and mobile connectivity has further accelerated this shift. Pesantren, traditionally seen as conservative institutions, are now at a crossroads, adapting to technological advancements (Ghufron et al., 2023; Zamroni et al., 2023). The shift towards utilizing social media represents a significant cultural and operational change for pesantren, as it enables them to reach prospective students across geographic and cultural boundaries. Social media has not only become an advertising platform but a dynamic tool for building relationships, sharing institutional values, and portraying a strong, positive public image.

The importance of social media in shaping public perception through strategic content creation. Social media serves as a powerful tool for educational institutions to engage with a broader audience and enhance their public image (Berdiieva & Goroshko, 2022; Zubaidah et al., 2024). The branding process

involves both the active creation of content and the ongoing interaction with the community. Baines et al., (2022) underscores the significance of optimizing social media platforms for better institutional engagement, particularly in the context of educational outcomes. Social media's impact on institutional image is profound, suggesting a direct correlation between effective social media management and improved institutional reputation (Akbar et al., 2022). Granic et al., (2020) highlight the necessity for educational institutions to evolve in response to technological advancements, ensuring continued relevance in a rapidly changing digital environment.

Most existing studies concentrate on conventional schools or higher education institutions, leaving a void in understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by pesantren in adapting to digital tools. Additionally, while research has explored the role of social media in branding, there is limited exploration of how pesantren can optimize these platforms to reach a broader audience while maintaining their religious and cultural values. This research aims to fill these gaps by investigating the strategies employed by two pesantren, PP. Al-Mashduqiah and PP. Asy-Syarify, to establish a strong brand presence through social media. By focusing on these institutions, this study seeks to contribute new insights into the intersection of religious education and digital media strategies.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the role of social media optimization in enhancing the brand image of pesantren. This study will specifically focus on two pesantren: PP. Al-Mashduqiah in Probolinggo and PP. Asy-Syarify in Lumajang. Both institutions have successfully utilized social media to expand their reach and establish a strong public image, with PP. Asy-Syarify being recognized for its eco-friendly initiatives. The research will explore the strategies employed by these pesantren to leverage social media for branding, including the type of content shared, the platforms used, and the engagement with their audience. It will also examine how these pesantren maintain their religious identity while modernizing their approach to education and public outreach.

This research brings originality by focusing on pesantren, a group of educational institutions often overlooked in branding studies. The novelty lies in exploring how pesantren can strategically use social media to enhance their public image while maintaining their religious and cultural identity. By highlighting two case studies of pesantren, the research challenges conventional views that social media strategies are only applicable to secular educational institutions. Instead, it demonstrates how religious institutions can also harness digital tools to build a strong, relevant, and adaptive public image in today's digital age.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach, which produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from observed people and behaviors, as explained by Denzin and Lincoln in Moleong (Miller et al., 2020). The research type is a multi-site study, aiming to describe and analyze how social media management is optimized to improve the branding image of Pondok Pesantren Al-Mashduqiah in Kraksaan-Probolinggo and Pondok Pesantren Asy-Syarify in Tempeh-Lumajang. The researcher acts as the main instrument in this study, meaning that data was collected directly by the researcher.

The first research location is Pondok Pesantren Al-Mashduqiah in Probolinggo, which stands on donated land. The second location is Pondok Pesantren Asy-Syarify in Lumajang, founded by KH. Fawahim 'Adzra'i Syarif. These locations were chosen based on several academic reasons, including differences in educational models, the dynamics of social media management, relevance to the topic, ease of access, and how these pesantren represent Islamic education in the digital era.

The data sources include primary data from interviews, observations, and participation with the pesantren's social media teams, leaders, teachers, students, and others involved. Secondary data comes from official documents, social media guidelines, activity reports, digital archives, and content such as posts, videos, infographics, and engagement data. Data collection methods include interviews to explore strategies and challenges, observations to understand daily digital practices, and document review to support the findings. The data is analyzed using interactive analysis, which involves selecting the most relevant data, presenting it clearly in narrative or visual forms, and drawing conclusions that are checked and confirmed for accuracy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Role of Professional Social Media Admins in Institutional Image

Professional social media admins play a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining an institution's image on digital platforms. Their expertise in creating strategic content, engaging with followers, and analyzing performance metrics ensures that the institution's public image is not only promoted but also continually refined. These admins are responsible for crafting posts that align with the institution's values, targeting the right audience, and responding to inquiries or comments in a manner that reflects the institution's ethos. The study found that social media admins who have a deep understanding of both branding and social media trends are more successful in fostering positive engagement with the audience. Their strategic oversight helps in enhancing the

credibility and trustworthiness of the institution, contributing to a strong and consistent brand image.

The critical role professional social media admins play in shaping the public perception of an institution. By ensuring that content is consistent, on-brand, and strategically timed, social media admins significantly contribute to enhancing the institution's reputation. Their expertise is crucial in navigating the fast-paced world of social media, where public opinion can shift rapidly (see Table 1). The ability of social media admins to manage this dynamic environment helps establish the institution as both modern and responsive, attributes that are highly valued in today's digital age.

Table 1. Social Media Team Structure

<i>Pesantren</i>	Team Name	Established	Key Structure
Al-Mashduqiah	Multimedia Masduqiah (MM)	2017	Infocom Director: Ust. Basri Arianto; Team Lead: Ust. Ro'fad; Members: design, captions, photo, video, editing
Asy-Syarifiy	Tim Media Asy-Syarifiy	2009	Team Leader; Creative members (Eco-Pesantren, da'wah, video); Editors; Photographers

Pesantren with dedicated social media admins tend to have a stronger online presence. Admins who actively engage with the audience, respond to inquiries, and regularly post high-quality content significantly enhance the brand image of the institution. In contrast, institutions without a professional social media team often struggle to maintain a consistent online presence, which negatively impacts their public perception. This reinforces the importance of professional management in establishing and maintaining a positive brand image.

Professional social media admins play a pivotal role in shaping the institutional brand. Institutions that invest in trained professionals are more likely to see higher engagement levels, which directly correlate to a stronger public image. The ability of admins to understand the nuances of each platform and interact effectively with followers is central to building a positive and lasting institutional image. Having professional social media admins is not merely beneficial but essential for institutions aiming to enhance their brand image. These professionals provide the expertise needed to navigate the complexities of digital communication, ultimately helping the institution to remain relevant and positively perceived by its audience. The findings suggest that institutions without dedicated social media personnel may risk weakening their online presence and, by extension, their brand image.

Structured Content Strategy

A well-structured content strategy is essential for building a recognizable and strong institutional brand. The research highlights that educational institutions, including pesantren, benefit greatly from a well-planned and organized content calendar. The content strategy should not only focus on promoting the institution but also involve a mix of informative, engaging, and value-driven content that resonates with the target audience. This strategy includes regular updates, multimedia content, and interaction with followers through comments, polls, and messages. Institutions are able to maintain a steady presence online and foster greater interaction with their communities (see Table 2). This structure ensures that the content remains relevant and aligned with the goals of building a positive public image.

Table 2. Social Media Impact

Aspect	Al-Mashduqiah	Asy-Syarifiy
New student percentage	40–50% from social media	70% from social media
Featured content	PROSPEK, student music, daily life	Eco-Pesantren, da'wah, community messages
Main platforms	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook	Same, plus WhatsApp for parents
Audience response	High, based on engagement rate	Fast, based on response speed

A structured content strategy emerged as a key finding in this research, demonstrating its importance in maintaining a consistent and impactful institutional presence. The research highlighted that educational institutions with a clear and organized content strategy are more successful in engaging their audience. Such strategies involve regular posting schedules, content themes, and targeted messaging that aligns with the institution's overall mission and values. The admins mentioned using tools such as content calendars and performance analytics to track the effectiveness of their posts. This structured approach allowed them to create content that was not only timely but also aligned with the institution's goals, contributing to a more coherent brand image.

Islamic boarding school must take a strategic approach to content creation and management. This includes planning content ahead of time, aligning it with the institution's objectives, and adjusting based on audience feedback. Institutions that fail to adopt a structured strategy may struggle to stand out in the crowded digital space. Institutions need to be proactive in managing their content. A structured strategy ensures that content remains

relevant and targeted, fostering greater engagement and a more cohesive public image.

Certain Platforms Are More Effective for Audiences

The research revealed that different social media platforms serve distinct purposes and are more effective for different types of audiences. While some platforms are more suitable for visual content, others are better for informational or community-building purposes. For example, platforms like Instagram and TikTok are highly effective for targeting younger audiences with visual, creative content, while Facebook is better for reaching an older demographic through longer posts and event promotions. The study found that institutions need to tailor their content to the specific platform to achieve optimal engagement and reach. Understanding which platforms are more effective for their audience allows institutions to allocate resources efficiently and maximize the impact of their branding efforts.

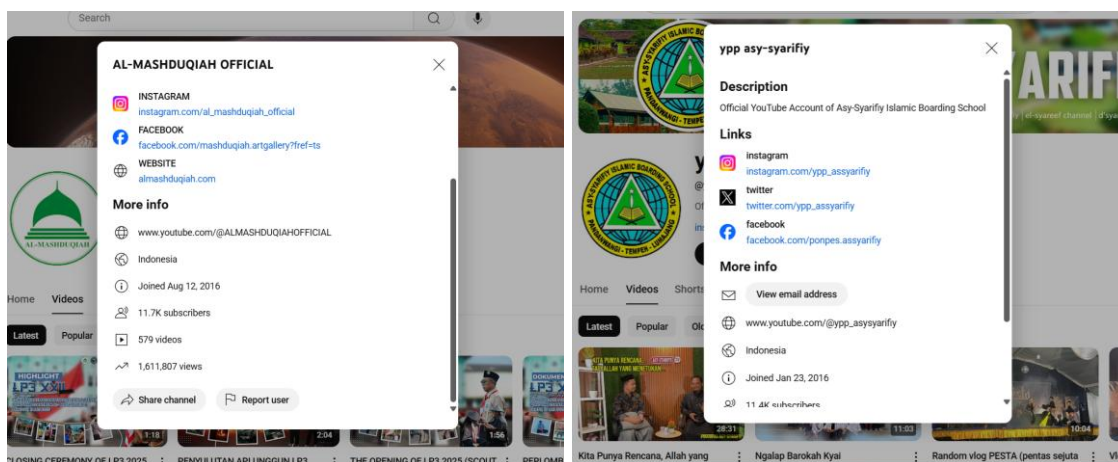


Figure 1. YouTube Account Platform

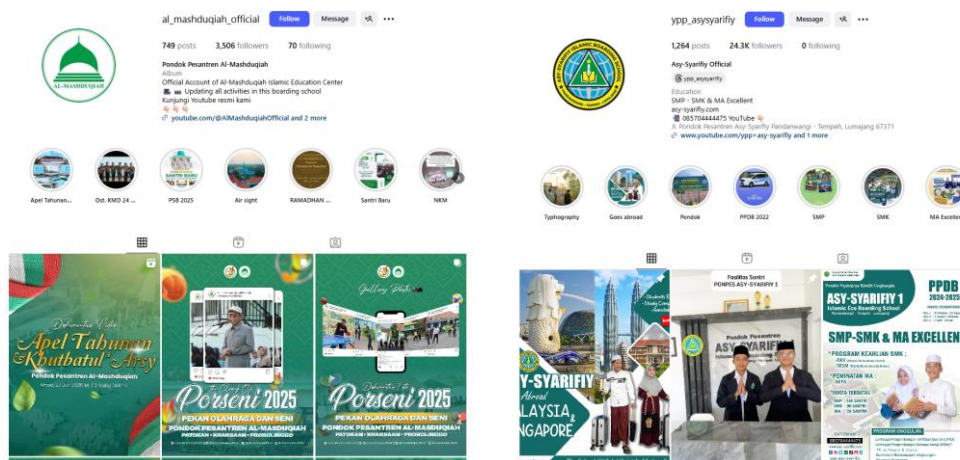


Figure 2. Instagram Account Platform

The research found that certain social media platforms are more effective for targeting specific audience segments. This is an important consideration for educational institutions, as different platforms cater to different demographics. Instagram and TikTok, for example, are popular among younger audiences, while Facebook remains widely used by older age groups. This highlights the need for institutions to tailor their content to each platform's strengths and user base.

The observation results indicated that institutions that adapted their content for specific platforms experienced higher levels of engagement and interaction. For instance, institutions that posted visually appealing content on Instagram and TikTok saw better engagement from younger audiences. Conversely, those targeting older demographics found more success on Facebook, where longer, more informative posts were more effective.

The demographics and preferences of the audience on each platform is essential for optimizing content. By targeting specific platforms with tailored content, institutions can maximize their engagement and improve the effectiveness of their branding efforts. This approach allows institutions to reach different segments of the population with relevant and engaging content. The research suggests that institutions need to adopt a platform-specific content strategy to ensure they are reaching their desired audience effectively. By tailoring content to the strengths of each platform, institutions can optimize their social media presence and improve their overall brand image.

Discussion

The research highlights the crucial role that professional social media administrators play in enhancing the brand image of Islamic boarding schools. Institutions that employ individuals or teams with specialized skills in social media management are significantly more likely to maintain a consistent and appealing online presence. Professional administrators bring expertise in content creation, audience engagement, trend analysis, and digital communication, allowing them to tailor messages that resonate with the institution's target audience (Mahdzir et al., 2021; Maki, 2023). These administrators are adept at crafting posts that align with the institution's values, responding promptly to interactions, and ensuring that the messaging is both clear and appealing.

Their ability to maintain visual consistency, tone of voice, and strategic timing contributes to the creation of a recognizable and trustworthy brand identity. The presence of dedicated admins also ensures that online platforms are regularly updated with relevant and engaging content, reducing the risk of the institution appearing inactive or outdated. Furthermore, institutions with professional social media teams tend to have higher engagement rates and better reputations online, as they are perceived as more modern, transparent, and

responsive (Ghorbanzadeh, 2023; Kachkar & Yilmaz, 2023). This research confirms that professional administrators are essential to the development of a strong institutional brand in the digital era.

This research finds that implementing a structured content strategy significantly enhances the branding efforts of Islamic boarding schools. Institutions that plan their content in advance and publish regularly tend to project a more professional and coherent image to their audience. A structured approach involves not only scheduling posts but also curating themes that align with the institution's mission, values, and educational goals (Ataman et al., 2024; Fahrullah et al., 2024; Zuhdi et al., 2024). Consistency in visual presentation, messaging tone, and posting frequency creates a sense of reliability and trust among followers. Schools that employ strategic content planning are better able to maintain audience interest, foster loyalty, and reinforce their brand identity over time.

The research shows that when content is diversified—such as including educational posts, spiritual reflections, student testimonials, and event highlights—it appeals to a wider audience and encourages more meaningful interactions. Furthermore, structured strategies enable institutions to track what types of content perform best, allowing for continuous improvement and alignment with audience expectations (Atabik et al., 2024; Hasbiallah et al., 2024). In contrast, institutions that lack planning often post sporadically, leading to disjointed messaging and decreased public interest. Structured content strategies emerge as a critical tool for educational institutions seeking to establish and maintain a strong digital brand presence.

The research demonstrates that different social media platforms serve different audience segments, and understanding these differences is essential for optimizing communication strategies. Islamic boarding schools that tailor their content according to platform-specific preferences are more successful in engaging their target demographics. For example, platforms like Instagram and TikTok are particularly effective in reaching younger audiences due to their visual nature and fast-paced content formats (Berdiieva & Goroshko, 2022; Stahl & Literat, 2023). Short videos, reels, and visually appealing images perform exceptionally well on these platforms and are ideal for showcasing campus life, student activities, or inspirational messages.

Schools that recognize these distinctions and adjust their content accordingly experience higher levels of interaction and a stronger connection with their audience. This approach not only enhances engagement but also ensures that the school's message is delivered in a format and tone appropriate to the platform's user base. The research confirms that audience-centric content planning across platforms is a key factor in maximizing visibility, fostering engagement, and reinforcing a positive institutional image in the digital space.

CONCLUSION

The optimization of social media management at PP. Al-Mashduqiah Probolinggo and PP. Asy-Syarify Lumajang is carried out by maximizing time and energy efficiency, improving content quality, maintaining consistent productivity, minimizing costs, and ensuring stakeholder satisfaction. At Al-Mashduqiah, the additional focus is on audience engagement, while at Asy-Syarify, the focus is on the speed of the social media team's response. The impact of this optimization can be seen in the increased number of new students registering through social media and the growing public trust in pesantren graduates. The main challenges in managing social media in both pesantren include frequent changes in team members, the absence of specific content guidelines, and unstable team mentality in handling feedback.

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