



Beyond Digital Branding: Public Relations as a Managerial Mechanism for Building a Positive Institutional Image in an Islamic Boarding School

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Abstrak

Public relations in Islamic educational institutions no longer functions merely as an information dissemination unit but also serves as a managerial mechanism for building a positive institutional image. This study aims to analyze how public relations management strategies are implemented to build a positive image at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1. A qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving the Head of Public Relations and supporting informants engaged in public relations activities. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal three major public relations strategies. First, public relations integrate digital communication with direct stakeholder engagement through the Silaturahmi Ar-Rohmah Indonesia (SAI) program, Sholat Lail Jama'i, scholarship programs, institutional partnerships, and digital media utilization. Second, public relations function as a managerial mechanism by coordinating organizational units through regular coordination meetings, publication management, and program alignment to ensure integrated organizational communication. Third, public relations contribute to managing operational challenges by coordinating with parents, local communities, and external institutions to maintain public trust and preserve the institution's positive image. These findings suggest that building a positive institutional image extends beyond digital branding and relies on the ability of public relations to integrate communication, organizational coordination, and stakeholder relationship management as a strategic managerial mechanism that supports the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: Public Relations, Managerial Mechanism, Positive Image, Islamic Boarding School

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INTRODUCTION

مقدمة

The role of public relations (PR) management in Islamic educational institutions is becoming increasingly important as public needs grow more complex and competition among institutions intensifies (Isnaini, 2025). Indonesia has thousands of Islamic educational institutions that are continuously expanding, making public image management and communication key issues that directly impact public trust, enrollment numbers, and the institutions' reputations. In the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), public relations is not only about promotion but also about service quality, internal coordination, and relationships between the school, parents, the community, and the government (Habib et al., 2023). This aligns with research (Jufaini, 2023) that explains the role of public relations (PR) management in Islamic boarding schools in building

harmonious relationships with the community, parents, and alumni, which shows that distinguishing between internal and external public relations supports communication efficiency.

However, existing research has not yet sufficiently explained how public relations actually functions within the context of modern Islamic educational institutions, which have numerous units, flagship programs, and complex social dynamics. Some studies merely describe public relations strategies theoretically or focus solely on social media aspects, without explaining the role of public relations as a support system for all units within Islamic educational institutions. For example, the study conducted by (Jaelani, 2019) only examines public relations literature from conceptual or normative perspectives, such as the Islamic perspective on public relations. However, the results of an interview with the head of public relations at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 indicate that the public relations office at Ar-Rohmah Putri Campus 1 plays a very broad role, ranging from managing promotional media (Instagram for general information, the website for in-depth information), providing front-office services, coordinating promotions across units, to assisting each unit in achieving the institution's quality targets. Detailed practices such as synchronizing schedules with the academic calendar, coordinating activities with junior high schools, senior high schools, Islamic boarding schools (junior high level), and dormitory units, as well as handling public complaints regarding traffic congestion during school reunion events, have not been extensively discussed in previous research (Sardinia, 2025). The lack of empirical studies that describe the operational realities of public relations in Islamic boarding schools underscores the urgency of this research, as previously noted by several researchers who have lamented the lack of structured documentation on public relations practices in Islamic boarding schools (Yaqin & Fahlifi, 2023).

This study is also necessary because it has a specific objective that differs from previous research, namely to examine in detail how public relations strategies are implemented in the context of a large-scale Islamic educational institution with multiple campuses and flagship programs. Based on the results of an interview with the head of public relations (Sardinia, 2025) at Ar-Rohmah Putri, there are three campuses with distinct characteristics: Campus 1 (tahfidz, regular, tahassus), Campus 2 (international, Cambridge curriculum), and Campus 3 (tahfidz and international). This study focuses solely on Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1. Each campus has a different director, organizational structure, and promotional needs. Public relations helps promote each of these strengths while also managing external relationships, such as collaborations with universities (UNAIR, UMM, UB, UNESA), government agencies (local police station, military sub-district command, community health center), and the publicization of student achievements such as pathways to higher education through entrance exams and tahfidz accomplishments. Another study discusses the urgency of public relations management in Islamic educational institutions, how public relations helps realize the institution's vision and mission through external and internal communication, and builds the institution's image (IFES Mulyani, 2025). Previous research has indeed shown that public relations plays a role in shaping an institution's image, but no study has yet explained how public relations manages coordination among three campuses with different visions and diverse public needs (Sucik, 2024).

This research is very relevant because it contains aspects that need to be tested, namely the effectiveness of public relations strategies in the context of internal dynamics of the institution. Interview data revealed several challenges: activity schedules that do not always match the conditions of the unit, sudden requests from units to the public relations department, human resource constraints, and differences in priorities between units related to publications.

The handling of problematic human resources is also carried out through the SP 1-SP 3 mechanism of tiered levels, up to the possibility of transfer or dismissal. Furthermore, public relations also plays a role in dealing with external problems such as congestion during students' return through traffic engineering, coordination with Linmas and Polsek, drive-thru systems, distribution of return schedules, and outreach to parents. These various dynamics suggest that a good public relations strategy needs to be tested at the actual implementation level, as suggested in a study on public relations management in Islamic dormitories that emphasizes the importance of consistent implementation and internal evaluation (Sugiarto, 2025) .

Based on these gaps, this study aims to: 1) Public relations management is a strategic issue that significantly determines the sustainability and reputation of Islamic educational institutions, especially in the midst of increasing demands for transparency and inter-institutional competition. 2) Existing studies have not provided much empirical insight into how public relations operate in complex institutional contexts with many units, leaving gaps that need to be filled by new research. 3) This study has a more specific focus than previous studies, which is to examine how public relations strategies are actually implemented in everyday practice, not just at a conceptual level. 4) This study also seeks to test whether the designed public relations strategy is effective when dealing with internal and external institutional dynamics, such as human resource constraints, coordination between units, and interaction with the public.

The above statements confirm that this research is not only theoretically relevant but also has practical significance for the development of public relations management in Islamic educational institutions.

This study is highly relevant because it addresses aspects that need to be examined, namely the effectiveness of public relations strategies in the context of an organization's internal dynamics. Interview data revealed several challenges: activity schedules that do not always align with the units' circumstances, sudden requests from units to the public relations department, human resource constraints, and differing priorities among units regarding publications.

The handling of problematic human resources is also carried out through a tiered SP 1– SP 3 mechanism, up to the possibility of transfer or dismissal. Furthermore, public relations also plays a role in addressing external issues such as traffic congestion during student dismissal through traffic engineering, coordination with the Civil Defense (Linmas) and the local police station (Polsek), a drive-thru system, the distribution of dismissal schedules, and outreach to parents. These various dynamics demonstrate that effective public relations strategies must be tested at the level of actual implementation, as suggested in research on public relations management in Islamic boarding schools, which emphasizes the importance of consistent implementation and internal evaluation (Sugiarto, 2025).

Based on these gaps, this study aims to: 1) Public relations management is a strategic issue that significantly determines the sustainability and reputation of Islamic educational institutions, especially amid increasing demands for transparency and competition among institutions. 2) Existing studies have not provided much empirical insight into how public relations operate within the context of complex institutions with multiple units, leaving a gap that needs to be filled by new research. 3) This study has a more specific focus than previous studies, namely examining how public relations strategies are actually implemented in daily practice, rather than merely at the conceptual level. 4) This study also seeks to test whether the designed public relations strategies are effective when faced with internal and external institutional dynamics, such as human resource constraints, coordination among units, and interactions with the public.

The statements above affirm that this study is not only theoretically relevant but also has practical significance for the development of public relations management in Islamic educational institutions.

METHOD

منهج

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. The research was conducted at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1, Malang Regency, East Java, Indonesia. Campus 1 was selected through purposive sampling because it was the focus of the study in examining the implementation of public relations management strategies in building a positive image for Islamic educational institutions. Therefore, the entire data collection process was conducted at units located on Campus 1.

The data was collected from two sources. Primary data Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, taking into account their authority, experience, and direct involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of public relations management at Campus 1 of the Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School. A total of five key informants participated in this study. The primary informant was the Head of the Public Relations Department (Humasy), who is responsible for institutional communication, stakeholder engagement, promotional strategies, and coordination among educational units. To enrich and validate the findings, additional informants included the Head of the Junior High School Unit, the Head of the Senior High School Unit, the Head of the Diniyah Unit, and the Head of the Dormitory Unit. These participants were selected because they are directly involved in the institution's management and routinely collaborate with the Public Relations Division in implementing programs, coordinating institutional activities, communicating with parents and external stakeholders, and supporting efforts to strengthen the institution's public image. Secondary data comes from institutional documents, such as work programs, photos of activities like those of SAI (Islamic Student Association) and Lailatul Qa'i prayers, SP policies, and documentation of external collaborations.

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, document review, and direct observation of public relations activities and institutional operations. Interviews were used to explore informants' experiences, documents were used to corroborate findings, and observations were used to understand daily work patterns. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by (Miles Matthew B, A. Michael Huberman, 2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data analysis was conducted continuously throughout the research process. Interview transcripts, field notes, and institutional documents were first condensed by identifying meaningful units relevant to the research objectives. The condensed data were then organized into thematic displays to facilitate interpretation of patterns and relationships among categories. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified through comparison across multiple data sources until consistent and credible findings were obtained.

Using this method, the study is expected to provide a clear, realistic, and in-depth picture of how Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 public relations strategy is implemented to build a positive image of the institution.

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research. Before data collection began, all informants were provided with an explanation of the study's objectives, benefits, and the interview procedures to be followed. Informed consent was

obtained voluntarily, and each informant was given the freedom to terminate the interview at any time without any consequences. To maintain data confidentiality, the informants' full identities were not disclosed; they were identified only by their positions or roles within their institutions. All data from interviews, observations, and documentation were used solely for academic purposes and analyzed objectively in accordance with the principles of research integrity.

RESULT | نتائج

This section presents the main research findings regarding how public relations management strategies at Ar-Rohmah Putri are implemented in practice. The data presented describe organizational behavior, coordination patterns, communication strategies, obstacles encountered, and how public relations are shaped through public relations activities and other supporting units.

Public Relations Strategies Evident in Institutional Operations

The research findings indicate that the public relations strategies at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 are not only focused on disseminating information through digital media such as Instagram which serves as a platform for conveying general information and the institution's website, which provides more comprehensive and in-depth information. They are also manifested in various operational activities involving direct interaction with parents, partner schools, the community, and various stakeholders. These strategies are implemented through the Silaturahmi (SAI) program, scholarship awards, Sholat Lail Jama'i activities, digital publications, and collaborations with various external institutions.

According to the head of public relations, "We conduct direct outreach visits to schools, government agencies, and the homes of students' guardians. For guardians residing outside Java, communication is primarily conducted online. Additionally, we have the Ikawasarba community in Bali, which plays a vital role in maintaining Ar-Rohmah's positive reputation." (Sardinia, 2025).

This indicates that public relations strategies are not only aimed at introducing the institution to the public but also at building long-term relationships with parents, alumni, and the local community as part of shaping a positive image of the institution.

The dissemination of information through digital channels ranges from daily schedules and event announcements to the promotion of school programs and the publication of student achievements. The intensity of publicity is also evident in the Public Relations department's involvement in nearly all unit activities, particularly during the new student admission season, the implementation of flagship programs, and the publicization of external collaborations such as those with UNAIR, UB, UMM, and UNESA—as well as the institution's public relations efforts through word-of-mouth communication. This demonstrates that public relations functions not only as a conduit for information but also as the institution's primary platform, presenting a public narrative about the school's image, campus identity, flagship programs, and student life.

The Relationship Between Inter-Unit Coordination and Public Relations Performance

The research findings indicate that the effectiveness of public relations at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 is significantly influenced by the quality of inter-unit coordination. In carrying out its public relations functions, the Public Relations Office (Humasy) is not only responsible for managing publications and external communications but also serves as a managerial mechanism that connects various units to ensure all programs align with the

institution's vision and goals. This coordination is conducted regularly through Dikmen meetings involving five main units: Junior High School (SMP), Senior High School (SMA), Diniyah, the Dormitory, and the Public Relations Office (Humasy).

As stated by the Head of the Public Relations Office: "Work programs are carried out through Dikmen meetings involving five units: Junior High School (SMP), Senior High School (SMA), Diniyah, Dormitory, and the Public Relations Office. Through these meetings, we align our vision and mission, synergize work programs, build communication between units, evaluate obstacles, and ensure that every unit moves toward the institution's shared goals." (Sardinia, 2025).

This statement indicates that coordination meetings serve not only as a forum for sharing information but also as a mechanism for aligning work programs, identifying obstacles, and reaching joint decisions. Thus, coordination among units is a critical factor in supporting the effective implementation of public relations functions.

In addition to acting as a coordinator, the Public Relations Office also functions as a support unit for every department within the institution. Various units actively submit requests to the Public Relations Office, such as for the publication of activities, documentation, information dissemination, and program promotion. However, this study found that the coordination process does not always run smoothly. One of the challenges that frequently arises is the disparity in program readiness among units, as well as each unit's desire to have all of its activities publicized.

The Head of the Public Relations Office explained: "Every unit wants all of its activities to be publicized. However, the Public Relations Office has its own strategy for determining which content to publish. We select activities that have value and can represent Ar-Rohmah's identity, so that our publications are not merely numerous but also of high quality and have a clear purpose." (Sardinia, 2025).

These findings indicate that the role of the Public Relations Office is not limited to documenting all of the institution's activities, but also involves strategically selecting and managing information. Decisions regarding publication content are based on the values the institution seeks to promote, ensuring that communications conveyed to the public remain consistent with the institution's identity.

In addition, coordination among units is necessary to align program implementation with the academic calendar and the operational conditions of each unit. Although activity schedules are planned in advance, in practice changes often occur that require adjustments through intensive communication among units. Therefore, routine evaluations are a crucial part of maintaining effective coordination.

As stated by the Head of Public Relations: "Sometimes the schedule is already listed in the academic calendar, but its implementation must be adjusted to the conditions of each unit. That is why we conduct evaluations together with the chairperson, the school principal, the curriculum department, the student affairs department, and the coordinators to ensure that activities continue to run in accordance with the institution's objectives." (Sardinia, 2025).

These findings show that the success of public relations is determined not only by the ability to convey information to the public, but also by the effectiveness of internal coordination in aligning programs, managing conflicts of interest among units, and building organizational synergy. Thus, public relations at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 serves as a

managerial mechanism that integrates communication, coordination, and decision-making to support the development of a positive institutional image.

The Role of Public Relations in Managing Operational Challenges and Maintaining a Positive Image

Research findings indicate that the role of public relations at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 extends beyond information dissemination and inter-departmental coordination. Public relations also play a role in managing various operational challenges that could potentially influence public perception of the institution. These challenges include organizing students' return home, coordinating with parents, communicating with the surrounding community, and collaborating with external agencies.

The Head of Public Relations explained: "During student dismissal, there is usually heavy traffic. To address this, we stagger the dismissal schedule, collaborate with the Civil Defense (Linmas) and the local police station (Polsek), provide a drive-thru system, and share information with parents through official channels to ensure the pickup process runs smoothly." (Sardinia, 2025).

These findings indicate that the Public Relations Office functions not only as a conduit for information but also as a coordinator among various stakeholders in maintaining a comfortable environment at the boarding school and preserving public trust.

In addition, this study found that coordination with students' guardians is carried out on an ongoing basis through consultation services, digital communication, and evaluation of various feedback provided by parents. These mechanisms enable the institution to respond more quickly to stakeholders' needs while strengthening the relationship between the institution and the community.

DISCUSSION | مناقشة

Public Relations Strategies as an Integrated Approach to Building a Positive Institutional Image

The research findings indicate that the public relations strategy at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 does not rely solely on the use of digital media but also integrates face-to-face communication through the Silaturahmi Ar-Rohmah Indonesia (SAI) program, the Sholat Lail Jama'i activities, scholarship programs, and partnerships with various educational and government institutions. These findings indicate that the formation of a positive institutional image results from a combination of digital communication and direct engagement with stakeholders.

This aligns with the concept of two-way symmetrical communication proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), namely that effective public relations not only conveys information to the public but also builds mutually beneficial relationships through dialogue and stakeholder participation (Qu Yan & Adam J Saffer 2023). In the context of this study, the SAI program, joint activities with students' guardians, and the Ikawasarba community demonstrate that public relations builds trust through ongoing interaction, not merely through digital publications.

In addition, the research findings also show that the use of Instagram and websites is not the primary objective of public relations strategies, but rather serves as a supporting medium to strengthen the communication that has been established through direct interaction. This finding expands our understanding of the concept of "Beyond Digital Branding," namely that the positive image of Islamic educational institutions is not formed solely through digital exposure, but

through real experiences and social relationships built continuously with the community (Ramadan et al., 2026).

Thus, this study contributes to the understanding that public relations strategies in Islamic boarding schools cannot be viewed merely as promotional activities but as a process of building trust and fostering long-term stakeholder engagement.

Public Relations as a Managerial Mechanism in Inter-Unit Coordination

This study found that public relations at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 performs a broader function than just external communication activities. Through Dikmen meetings and routine coordination with the junior high school, senior high school, Diniyah, dormitory, and public relations units, public relations serve as a managerial mechanism that integrates various programs to align with the institution's vision.

These findings support the concept of the “managerial role of public relations” proposed by Dozier (1992) and further developed by Broom and Sha (2013), which explains that public relations practitioners do not merely act as “communication technicians” but are also integral to the organization's strategic decision-making process (Steyn, 2022). In this study, the public relations department did not merely publicize activities but also screened information, aligned publication priorities, facilitated coordination among units, and evaluated the implementation of institutional programs.

This also demonstrates that the success of public relations is greatly influenced by the quality of an organization's internal communication. When coordination among units is effective, the processes of publishing, implementing programs, and conveying information to the public become more focused (Mubarakah & Susilawati, 2023). Conversely, differences in program readiness or the interests of individual units can affect the effectiveness of institutional communication. Therefore, public relations serves as a liaison that aligns the interests of various units so that the institution's identity and messages remain consistent (Lailly et al., 2023).

The findings of this study indicate that, in the context of modern Islamic boarding schools, public relations serves as a managerial mechanism that integrates communication, coordination, and organizational decision-making. This role expands the traditional functions of public relations, which have largely been understood as media management and promotion.

The Role of Public Relations in Managing Operational Challenges to Maintain a Positive Image

The research findings indicate that public relations plays a role not only in building a positive image through communication but also in managing various operational challenges that could potentially influence public perception of the institution. Handling traffic congestion during students' return home, coordinating with parents, and collaborating with the Civil Defense (Linmas) and the local police station (Polsek) demonstrate that public relations activities also encompass issue management and cross-stakeholder coordination.

This aligns with the concept of issues management in public relations, which emphasizes the importance of an organization's ability to identify, manage, and respond to issues before they escalate into crises that could damage the organization's reputation (Babatunde, 2022). In this study, the strategies of scheduling staggered return times, providing a drive-thru system, and disseminating information through official media constitute forms of proactive communication aimed at reducing potential conflicts with the surrounding community while maintaining the trust of the students' guardians.

In addition, consultation services for parents and mechanisms for evaluating various forms of feedback indicate that public relations also serve the function of stakeholder relationship management—that is, maintaining sustainable relationships through two-way communication and responding to public needs. Thus, an institution's positive image is built not only through the success of promotional programs but also through the organization's ability to provide services, resolve operational issues, and maintain the quality of its relationships with the public (Sutipyo Ru'iya, et al., 2024).

The results of this study reinforce the argument that public relations in Islamic educational institutions serve strategic and adaptive functions. This role is not limited to external communication but also encompasses managing relationships with various stakeholders to safeguard the institution's reputation and sustainability amid operational dynamics.

CONCLUSION | خاتمة

This study shows that the public relations department at Ar-Rohmah Putri Islamic Boarding School Campus 1 plays a broader role than merely communicating and promoting the institution. Public relations serve as a managerial mechanism that integrates internal communication, inter-unit coordination, and the management of relationships with various stakeholders to build and maintain the institution's positive image.

Public relations strategies are implemented through a combination of digital and face-to-face communication, such as the Silaturahmi Ar-Rohmah Indonesia (SAI) program, Sholat Lail Jama'i, scholarship programs, partnerships with various institutions, and the use of digital media as a communication support tool. Furthermore, the effectiveness of public relations is significantly influenced by internal coordination carried out through regular meetings, program alignment, publication management, and joint evaluations, ensuring that each unit operates in accordance with the institution's vision. This study also demonstrates that public relations play a strategic role in managing various operational challenges, including coordination with students' guardians, the community, and external agencies, as part of efforts to maintain public trust and safeguard the institution's reputation.

The main contribution of this study is to demonstrate that building a positive image for Islamic educational institutions depends not only on digital branding but also on the ability of public relations to carry out its managerial functions.

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