



## Public Relations and Crisis Management Strategies for Countering Misinformation About Islamic Boarding Schools: A Case Study of the Tahfidzul Qur'an Baitul Makmur Islamic Boarding School in Malang

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### Abstract

Advances in information and communication technology have accelerated the spread of information through social media, but at the same time have also increased the potential for the spread of hoaxes that can affect the image of Islamic educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools. Hoaxes regarding Islamic boarding schools such as issues of violence, radicalism, health, and even the integrity of caregivers have the potential to trigger a reputational crisis if not handled appropriately. This study aims to analyze public relations and crisis management strategies for countering hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools through a case study at the Tahfidzul Qur'an Baitul Makmur Islamic Boarding School in Malang. This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, and were then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study show that hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools spread through various social media platforms by exploiting anonymous accounts, digital chat groups, and social media algorithms that accelerate the virality of information. The public relations strategies implemented include early issue detection, prompt and transparent clarification through official channels, strengthening digital literacy among pesantren residents, and collaborating with community leaders and the media to build public trust. These strategies are an integral part of crisis management in controlling the spread of hoaxes, safeguarding the institution's reputation, and strengthening the resilience of pesantren communication in the digital age. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of public relations and crisis management strategies in addressing hoaxes at Islamic educational institutions, thereby producing a conceptual model of crisis communication that is adaptive to the characteristics of the social media ecosystem and enriching the study of public relations in pesantren.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Crisis Management, Misinformation, Islamic Boarding Schools, social media.

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## INTRODUCTION

## مقدمة

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is experiencing rapid development, particularly in digital technology (the internet). This is evident in the number of internet users, which is increasing significantly. According to data from aseanup.com, in January 2017, internet users in Indonesia reached 132.7 million, with 106 million social media users. This number increased in 2018, according to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), which reported an increase of 171.17 million internet users (Febriansyah & Muskin, 2020). Social media offers numerous benefits through various positive activities accessible to all groups.

However, it also raises various problems. Simple issues can escalate, and misuse of these platforms is common, including fraud, crime, online gambling, kidnapping, online prostitution, and the spread of hoaxes, which can undermine democracy and threaten social unity.

According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), hoax means fake news, false news, or false information. The term hoax has become popular along with the popularity of social media (Romelteamedia, 2017). A hoax is a lie created by certain people and used for personal gain, either extrinsically or intrinsically, to divert attention or conceal the truth. Hoaxes are misleading and dangerous information (Febriansyah & Muskin, 2020). Hoax news is often spread with a specific purpose and intent. In addition, hoaxes can also be used to mislead the public or influence public opinion. With the advent of technology and social media, the spread of hoax news has become easier and faster, so it is important to always be vigilant and check the accuracy of information before spreading it (Kemhan, 2025). Islamic boarding schools are often targets for the spread of hoaxes due to their sensitive position in the social, religious, and educational landscape in Indonesia. This sensitivity primarily arises from issues inherent in the image of Islamic boarding schools, such as violence, religious ideology, the health of students, and morality issues. These issues have high public appeal and are easily exploited by certain parties to create unrest, build negative opinions, or fuel polarization. In the context of digital media, particularly social media, narratives about Islamic boarding schools are often produced and reproduced without adequate verification, increasing the potential for information distortion.

Hoax news often aims to divide the community, both on a small scale, such as within a community, and on a larger scale, such as within a nation. This can lead to conflict between individuals or groups, even to the point of societal division. Hoaxes can also reinforce sentiments of hatred and discrimination against certain groups, ultimately destroying harmony within society (Ministry of Defense, 2025). Furthermore, the complex structure of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and the limited digital literacy of some members of the public create fertile ground for the circulation of inaccurate information. Consequently, hoaxes targeting Islamic boarding schools not only impact the institution's reputation but also affect public trust in Islamic education more broadly. Therefore, understanding the roots of this sensitive issue is crucial as a basis for formulating responsive, adaptive communication and public relations strategies oriented toward strengthening the image of Islamic boarding schools in the digital era.

The digital era has also given rise to new challenges in the form of active, critical, and often reactive netizens. The proliferation of user-generated content, such as viral videos, social media statuses, and digital comments, has created a new arena for the battle of narratives and perceptions. Small issues that are not handled properly can escalate into reputational crises due to uncontrolled virality. Unfortunately, some Islamic educational institutions still view the digital world as secondary, leaving them unprepared for public pressure in the form of digital crowds or buzzer attacks (Febriansyah & Muskin, 2020). The digital era demands that Islamic boarding schools be more responsive due to the rapid and reactive dynamics of the internet. User-generated content, from viral videos to comments, can trigger the formation of public opinion in a matter of minutes. Small issues that are not promptly addressed have the potential to escalate into reputational crises. However, many Islamic educational institutions still view the digital world as a secondary concern, leaving them ill-prepared for public pressure and increasingly complex digital dynamics.

The goal of public relations in Islamic boarding schools is to raise public aspirations, raise awareness of the importance of noble morals, and seek community support to ensure the proper development of Islamic boarding schools. The goals derived from theory and reality are closely

related, with both emphasizing the development of noble morals, a place for increasing public aspirations and support, as the goal of public relations (Finawati, 2022). Both theoretically and empirically, these goals are closely interconnected. Both modern public relations concepts and traditional Islamic boarding school practices place the development of noble morals and community participation as the primary foundations of the institution's success. A harmonious relationship between the Islamic boarding school and the community allows for effective educational and da'wah processes, while fostering public trust, which serves as essential social capital for the sustainability of the Islamic boarding school.

Research written by (Amar, 2024) shows that educational institutions, such as SMP Nurul Jadid Paiton Probolinggo, can build public trust by improving service quality, optimizing the role of Public Relations, and strengthening educator performance. Stakeholder involvement in service planning and evaluation, as well as attention to the needs of parents and students, are important strategies. In addition, the principal's leadership plays a major role in directing institutional strategies and improving teacher performance through supervision, training, and effective communication. Furthermore, research conducted by (Yaqin M.S & Fahlifi, 2023) Al-Qodiri Islamic Boarding School Public Relations maintains the positive image of the Islamic boarding school through faith- and knowledge-based strategies, such as implementing Majlis Dzikir Manaqib, maintaining relationships with the community, encouraging student achievement, developing infrastructure, and collaborating with various agencies. All elements of the Islamic boarding school—kiai, ustaz, students, and the surrounding community—are involved in implementing these strategies, although public relations management is not yet fully structured. Support from the surrounding community also helps ensure the smooth running of Islamic boarding school activities. This strategy has proven effective, as evidenced by the high level of trust among students' guardians and the annual increase in student enrollment.

The author was drawn to this topic because the widespread spread of hoaxes in the digital era has had a serious impact on Islamic educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). The rapid development of information and communication technology, particularly social media, has made the flow of information extremely fast, massive, and difficult to control. In this context, Islamic boarding schools are among the institutions most vulnerable to hoax attacks due to the sensitivity of issues inherent in the world of Islamic boarding schools, such as violence, religious ideology, student health, and morality. Narratives about Islamic boarding schools are often produced without adequate verification, creating distorted information that can damage the institution's reputation and affect public trust in Islamic education as a whole. The author's interest also arose from the phenomenon of the increasing digital crowd and the virality of user-generated content, which can trigger a reputational crisis in a short time. Many Islamic boarding schools are not yet adequately prepared to face digital public pressure, both in terms of media literacy and structured public relations strategies. Yet, public relations plays a strategic role in maintaining the institution's image, building effective communication with the public, and mitigating potential information conflicts.

Baitul Makmur Tahfidzul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School, Jl. Sawojajar 17B No. 58 – Sawojajar Village, Kedungkandang District, Malang City was chosen as the study location because it is an institution located in an urban environment with high digital community interaction, thus having complex information dynamics. Led by KH. Moch. Romli, a kiai with a strong commitment to fostering Qur'an memorization and strengthening the character of students, this Islamic boarding school emphasizes the integration of religious education, morals, and social literacy. Under this leadership, the Islamic boarding school strives to develop an educational system that

is adaptive to current developments while maintaining Islamic boarding school traditions. The leadership of the Islamic boarding school also encourages strengthening the role of public relations as a communication bridge between the institution and the community, especially in dealing with the dynamics of digital information flows. However, the public relations structure is still developing and faces challenges in managing issues arising from social media, including the spread of hoaxes that often require a quick and coordinated response. This condition makes the Baitul Makmur Malang Tahfidzul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School a relevant research location to examine how Islamic boarding schools formulate public relations strategies to prevent information distortion, while strengthening the institution's image amidst increasingly complex digital challenges.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus, which examines the direct link between hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools and public relations strategies in addressing distorted information on social media, an aspect that has not been widely addressed by previous research. This research also offers a new perspective by explaining Islamic boarding schools as sensitive spaces in the digital ecosystem and how this sensitivity influences the production and circulation of hoaxes. Furthermore, this research integrates analysis of social media virality, digital user behavior, and public relations crisis management within a comprehensive framework rarely used in Islamic boarding school public relations studies. Another novelty is the use of a case study of an urban tahfidz Islamic boarding school, which provides a different contextual contribution compared to previous research, which has mostly focused on large or traditional Islamic boarding schools. This research also produces an initial conceptual model of Islamic boarding school public relations strategies in detecting, responding to, and adaptively countering hoaxes in the digital era, thus providing added value both theoretically and practically.

Although various studies have examined public relations strategies at Islamic educational institutions and Islamic boarding schools, most still focus on strengthening the institutions' image, building public trust, or specific issues such as radicalism. Studies that integrate the dynamics of digital disinformation dissemination with public relations strategies from a crisis management perspective in Islamic boarding schools remain relatively limited, particularly those that comprehensively examine various forms of disinformation, such as issues related to violence, health, morality, and the reputation of religious leaders. Furthermore, this study is set in the context of the Tahfidzul Qur'an Baitul Makmur Islamic Boarding School in Malang, located in an urban environment with high internet penetration and social media usage, resulting in faster information flow and a greater potential for disinformation to go viral. These conditions demand public relations strategies that are not only capable of maintaining the institution's image but are also responsive in managing communication crises in the digital space. Thus, this study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the relationship between patterns of digital disinformation dissemination, public relations strategies, and crisis management at Islamic boarding schools in addressing communication challenges in the digital age.

## METHOD | منهج

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type, because it aims to understand in depth the phenomenon of the spread of hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools and public relations strategies in countering information distortion on social media. According to (Safrudin et al., 2023) qualitative methods are used to study objects in natural conditions, with the researcher as the main instrument, data collection techniques are carried out using triangulation, and research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization. The

qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to comprehensively explore the meaning, experience, and dynamics of communication that takes place in the environment of the Baitul Makmur Malang Tahfidzul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted with the boarding school leadership, public relations administrators, ustaz/ustazah, and students involved in digital activities, while observations were used to observe communication patterns and the boarding school's responses to digital issues.

Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. During the data reduction stage, the results of interviews, observations, and documentation were first transcribed, followed by an inductive coding process to identify themes emerging from the data, such as forms of digital disinformation, patterns of dissemination, public relations strategies, and crisis management. Codes with related content were then grouped into broader categories to facilitate the interpretation of research findings. The categorized data were subsequently presented in the form of systematic narrative descriptions so that the relationships between themes could be comprehensively analyzed. The final stage drawing conclusions was conducted interpretatively by comparing field findings with the theoretical framework used in the study. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation and methodological triangulation to ensure the accuracy, consistency, and credibility of the findings. This study involved ten key informants, consisting of Islamic boarding school leaders, public relations managers, ustaz/ustazah, and students, who served as the primary data sources.

## RESULT | نتائج

### Forms of Hoaxes about Islamic Boarding Schools on Social Media

Hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools circulating on social media take various forms and motives, generally designed to manipulate public emotions, reinforce negative stereotypes, or undermine traditional religious authority (Santoso et al., 2025). These forms can be categorized into several main patterns. In this context, the case study of the Baitul Makmur Qur'an Tahfidzul Islamic Boarding School in Malang demonstrates how these national hoax patterns manifest in specific local forms, thus providing a concrete illustration of how an Islamic boarding school faces the pressure of misinformation in the digital space.

First, hoaxes related to violence against Islamic boarding school students (pesantren) are among the most sensitive and easily trigger public outrage. These hoaxes often consist of false narratives about physical torture, inhumane punishment, or the mysterious death of a student. These narratives exploit common concerns about child protection and are often packaged with fake testimonials or fictitious documents to create a sense of authenticity (Nadzifah & Listyani, 2025). The goal is to portray Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as oppressive environments far from educational values. At Baitul Makmur Malang, this type of hoax emerged in the form of an anonymous post featuring a photo of a sick student, claiming to be a victim of Islamic boarding school violence. However, upon further investigation, the photo was not from the pesantren, and the student in question was undergoing routine treatment. This incident demonstrates how sensational content can quickly inflame public opinion despite having no factual basis.

Second, accusations of radicalism or extremism without concrete evidence are often directed at certain Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). These hoaxes typically link routine religious activities, such as religious studies, sermons, or da'wah training, with the indoctrination

of radical ideologies. Images of religious teachers (ustadz) or kiai (Islamic clerics) delivering sermons can be misrepresented as inciting hatred, even though this is not the case (Zuhdi, 2020). These accusations exploit global concerns about terrorism and are often spread to criminalize or isolate specific institutions.

Third, photos or videos of students' activities are manipulated to create misleading perceptions. For example, images of students practicing martial arts for health purposes are captioned "military training." Or, photos of camping or outdoor outbound activities are re-narrated as "war training in the jungle." Deepfake techniques, or simple photo editing, are often used to reinforce these false claims (Mutmainnah et al., 2024). The issue of students' hair-shaving is often twisted into misleading hoaxes, as if it were a form of punishment or violence. In fact, in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), including the Baitul Makmur Qur'an Tahfidzul Islamic Boarding School in Malang, hair-shaving is carried out for reasons of health, hygiene, and uniformity for new students. In the case of Baitul Makmur, photos of routine hair-shaving were recirculated with provocative narratives, creating negative perceptions. This incident demonstrates how standard Islamic boarding school practices can easily be misinterpreted when removed from their actual context.

Fourth, fictitious narratives circulate that directly attack the reputation and integrity of the caretaker or kiai. This form of hoax spreads stories of corruption of Islamic boarding school funds, sexual harassment, inappropriately luxurious lifestyles, or illicit relationships with certain parties. These narratives are designed to destroy the credibility and charisma of the leader, which are the main foundation of public trust in an Islamic boarding school (Fauzi et al., 2025). At Baitul Makmur, one particularly impactful hoax was an accusation of misuse of donations for dormitory construction. Posts made by the fake account included photos of fictitious transfers and edited documents alleging misappropriation of funds. Although baseless, these narratives sparked concern among parents of students and required official clarification from the Islamic boarding school.

Fifth, issues of health and hygiene within Islamic boarding schools are also exploited. Hoax content spreads claims that Islamic boarding schools are breeding grounds for disease, offer unsuitable food, have poor sanitation, or are sources of epidemics. Photos of slums that are not actually part of a specific Islamic boarding school are often used as evidence (Muslikhah, 2023). This issue exploits public health concerns, especially during the pandemic, to discredit Islamic boarding schools' ability to maintain a safe and healthy environment for their students.

Overall, these forms of hoaxes are not only diverse but also strategic, attacking the most fundamental aspects of Islamic boarding schools' existence: student safety, religious moderation, educational activities, leadership, and environmental well-being. A detailed understanding of each of these forms is a crucial first step in designing an effective public relations strategy to detect and counter them. The case study of the Baitul Makmur Tahfidzul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Malang shows that hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools do not exist in a vacuum, but rather operate through systematic patterns that exploit gaps in public perception. Therefore, understanding the characteristics of hoaxes and their manifestations in real cases is an important foundation for designing a responsive, measurable, and data-driven public relations strategy to counter information distortion on social media.

### **Patterns of Spread of Hoaxes about Islamic Boarding Schools on Social Media**

The spread of hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools on social media follows a complex digital ecosystem, characterized by the convergence of actors, platforms, and algorithmic

mechanisms. This process allows false information to outpace legitimate information at an alarming rate. The primary sources of hoaxes often originate from channels that are difficult to trace or account for. Anonymous accounts (buzzers or bots) on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram serve as strategic starting points, as they provide the spreader with protection from legal or social consequences (Rahmanto et al., 2022). Meanwhile, private and fragmented WhatsApp groups serve as powerful incubators and amplifiers. Within community-based groups, trust among members is high, so chain messages containing hoaxes are accepted as internal information that needs to be disseminated. Visual platforms like TikTok contribute through short video uploads that condense hoax narratives into easily digestible, entertaining, and viral formats, often featuring dramatic background music or provocative text (Mutmainnah et al., 2024). These sources often produce viral content with emotional narratives, such as anger at injustice, fear of threats, or compassion, which have been shown to significantly increase engagement.

The core pattern of dissemination is mass forwarding by unverified users. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, seemingly "urgent" or concerning information about a respected institution triggers a rapid response to share it, both as a form of warning and solidarity. Users act as unwitting volunteers in the disinformation chain, as their initial motives may be good (wanting to inform) but lack the habit of verifying (Nadzifah & Listyani, 2025). This mechanism of sharing, retweeting, and forwarding turns each user into a spreading node, creating a massive and difficult-to-control network effect.

The primary driving force accelerating and amplifying this pattern is social media platform algorithms. Algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement, and content that triggers strong emotions, such as negative or controversial content about Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), is more likely to be prioritized for display in feeds or the explore page (Rahmanto et al., 2022). When a hoax post begins to receive numerous reactions, comments, and shares, the algorithm interprets it as "popular" and automatically expands its reach to a wider audience, creating a self-sustaining cycle of virality. Thus, the platform indirectly contributes to the amplification of negative content, while more factual but less sensational corrective content from Islamic boarding school public relations often loses the race for the algorithm's attention. This combination of hard-to-trace sources, impulsive sharing behavior, and algorithmic logic creates a highly effective yet difficult-to-address pattern of hoax dissemination.

This phenomenon is also clearly visible in the case study of the Baitul Makmur Qur'an Tahfidzul Islamic Boarding School in Malang, where several hoaxes originating from anonymous accounts on Facebook and TikTok quickly spread to WhatsApp groups of students' guardians, amplified by emotional narratives and provocative visuals. When the posts began to receive high engagement, TikTok and Facebook algorithms automatically increased their reach, making the hoaxes go viral faster than official clarifications from the boarding school. The Baitul Makmur case demonstrates how the complex pattern of hoax spread starting from an unknown source, amplified by impulsive sharing behavior, and fueled by algorithms—can create a wave of misinformation that is difficult for traditional educational institutions to control.

### **The Impact of Hoaxes on the Reputation of Islamic Boarding Schools**

The spread of hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools not only causes a momentary uproar, but also has damaging multidimensional impacts, from the micro-individual level to the macro-institutional level. These impacts are interconnected and can gradually erode the social foundations of Islamic boarding schools. At the most personal level, hoaxes trigger deep anxiety

among students' guardians. False information about violence, radicalism, or poor hygiene directly appeals to parents' protective instincts. This creates anxiety, doubt, and even conflict within families, which can lead to students withdrawing from the Islamic boarding school (Nadzifah & Listyani, 2025). The trust that has been built between families and Islamic boarding school guardians is fractured, requiring extra effort to repair.

This erosion of trust extends to a broader public decline due to systematic information distortion. The reputation of Islamic boarding schools, built on integrity, wisdom, and social contribution, can be tarnished in an instant by manipulative viral narratives. The general public, lacking direct access, often relies on information from social media, thus creating a potential for hoaxes to shape negative and biased public perceptions of an Islamic boarding school, or even Islamic boarding schools in general (Santoso et al., 2025).

A further impact is the threat to the stability and internal harmony of Islamic boarding schools. Hoaxes, especially those that attack the kiai (Islamic cleric) or allege corruption, can fuel tension, mutual suspicion, and friction among students, ustadz (Islamic teachers), and administrators. The calm and focused learning environment can be disrupted by divisive issues, diverting energy from educational activities to crisis management (Fauzi et al., 2025).

Finally, the accumulation of all these impacts creates social pressure from the wider public. Islamic boarding schools can face stigmatization as "hotbeds of radicalism" or "institutions of violence," which impacts their relationships with local governments, donor agencies, partnerships, and the business world. This pressure can complicate social fundraising, the acceptance of new students, and opportunities for institutional development, ultimately limiting the socio-educational role of Islamic boarding schools in society.

These impacts are also evident in the case study of the Baitul Makmur Qur'an memorization Islamic boarding school in Malang. When hoaxes about violence against students and misconduct by their guardians circulated on social media, a number of parents reported anxiety and questioned their children's safety. The Islamic boarding school's reputation was negatively affected by the public perception created by the viral posts, which affected its relationship with the surrounding community. Internally, the hoaxes caused confusion and tension, especially among new students. The student admissions process even experienced a temporary slowdown due to growing doubts within the community. The Baitul Makmur case demonstrates how a series of micro- to macro-impacts can occur simultaneously when hoaxes are not immediately controlled through appropriate and responsive public relations strategies.

### **Public Relations Strategy in Countering Information Distortion**

Developing an effective public relations strategy in Islamic boarding schools is not only about building a positive image, but also about strengthening the relationship between the boarding school and the community. A good strategy allows the boarding school to be more open in communicating its values, programs, and various achievements, so that the community can directly see the significant role of the boarding school in education and social life. This strong relationship will foster trust, support, and mutually beneficial cooperation, both in social, educational, and religious activities. The impact will be very significant (Fahim & Abdurrahman, 2025).

Information distortion, particularly hoaxes and digital rumors, poses a significant challenge for educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools. The rapid flow of information allows a small issue to escalate into a reputational crisis within hours. Therefore,

public relations requires a systematic, measurable, and research-based strategy. Based on findings from various journals, the following comprehensive strategies can be used to effectively counter disinformation. Here are public relations strategies for countering information distortion:

### **1. Fast and Transparent Classification**

Response speed is a key determinant of public relations' success in controlling public opinion. When a hoax emerges, an institution needs to issue an official clarification within 24 hours through various channels: written releases, clarification videos, press conferences, and official social media posts. A study (Asfia & Sari, 2024) shows that prompt clarification can significantly reduce the spread of rumors because the public perceives the institution as in control of the situation and acting responsibly. Transparency is also a crucial factor. Clarifications should not be normative or merely denials. Institutions must explain the context of the event, the factual data, and the steps being taken. Open communication minimizes the scope for speculation and increases public trust in official information.

### **2. Data-Based Counter Narrative**

When hoaxes circulate, refutations are insufficient to dampen their impact. Public relations must produce data-based counter-narratives that are easily verified by the public. Counter-narratives can include documentation of student activities, institutional achievements, testimonials from student guardians, videos of the learning process, and infographics with supporting data. (Ismail & Yahya, 2024) emphasize that counter-narratives supported by visual evidence are far more effective than verbal clarification alone. This positive content helps the public see the full picture of the institution, making hoaxes lose their relevance.

### **3. Social Media Monitoring**

Social media monitoring serves as an early detection system. Public relations teams must monitor comments, conversations, viral posts, and even the sparks of rumors in WhatsApp groups or community platforms. According to research (Putra & Fachruddin, 2024), routine monitoring can prevent small issues from escalating into major crises because institutions can act before rumors spread. Effective monitoring includes mapping accounts that spread rumors, analyzing public sentiment, identifying complaint patterns, and reporting from Islamic boarding school residents (teachers, students, and parents). With this system, institutions have an early warning system that strengthens reputation protection.

### **4. Collaboration with Mass Media**

Mass media has the power of legitimacy. When an institution faces an issue, the presence of the media as a third party can strengthen its authority to clarify. (Fitri et al., 2025) explain that mainstream media coverage serves as a form of external validation that helps the public trust an institution's clarification. Effective media collaboration is achieved by providing accurate data to journalists, holding press conferences, providing competent spokespersons, and building long-term relationships with editorial staff. This ensures that an institution's message circulates not only internally but also reaches the broader public sphere.

### **5. Digital Literacy Education for Students and Guardians**

Institutional efforts to combat hoaxes are not enough. Islamic boarding school communities, including students, teachers, and parents, need to possess digital literacy skills to independently filter information. Research by Kurniasih & Rasyid (2025) demonstrates that

digital literacy plays a significant role in reducing the public's vulnerability to hoaxes. Digital literacy programs can include anti-hoax seminars, fact-checking workshops, social media ethics modules, simulations on detecting misinformation, and digital security training. As digital literacy improves, the risk of information distortion will naturally decrease.

## **6. Strengthening Institutional Branding**

An institution's branding is the strongest reputational shield. A positive image makes the public skeptical of negative information that doesn't align with the institution's track record. Research (Hidayati, 2025) explains that educational institutions with a strong reputation possess reputational resilience, meaning they remain trusted even when confronted with issues. Branding can be strengthened through consistent creative content, documentation of Islamic boarding school activities, campaigns promoting the institution's values, storytelling about successful alumni, and publication of academic and non-academic achievements. The better the institution's reputation, the less likely it is that hoaxes will damage public perception.

## **7. Effectiveness of Public Relations Strategy**

The effectiveness of a public relations strategy is a combination of response speed, data credibility, community digital literacy, and the strength of the institution's branding. (Ferdy & Agustian, 2024) state that a public relations strategy is considered effective if it can control the flow of opinion, reduce public confusion, and restore trust within a certain timeframe:

### ***1) Quick Clarification to Reduce Crisis***

Rapid clarification has a direct impact on opinion stability. A response within 24 hours de-escalates issues and prevents wild speculation. Delays actually increase the scope for misinformation. At the Baitul Makmur Qur'an Tahfidzul Islamic Boarding School in Malang, rapid clarification proved a key strategy in quelling the issue. When a hoax emerged regarding the treatment of students, the boarding school responded in less than 24 hours through an official post and a group of students' guardians. This rapid response de-escalated opinion and prevented wild speculation, while simultaneously limiting the scope for misinformation before it escalated into a larger crisis.

### ***2) Counter Narrative Shifts Public Perception***

Data-driven counter-narratives help the public assess issues objectively. The stronger the visual evidence, the more quickly public perception stabilizes. Baitul Makmur's public relations actively develops data-driven counter-narratives whenever false information emerges. In the case of a hoax about the Islamic boarding school's internal activities, the public relations team provided a chronology, photos of the activities, and an official statement from the administrator. This visual evidence facilitates the public's objective assessment of the issue, quickly dissipating negative perceptions and restoring stability.

### ***3) Monitoring Reduces Crisis Risk***

Social media monitoring allows institutions to act before rumors spread. This allows public relations to be more proactive rather than reactive. Case studies show that Islamic boarding schools routinely monitor social media, including Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and TikTok. Through this monitoring, public relations can detect provocative posts early, such as slanderous comments on content related to the Islamic boarding school. Early detection allows public relations to act proactively by clarifying issues before rumors spread widely.

### ***4) Mass Media Increases the Credibility of Clarification***

Collaboration with the media adds legitimacy, as the public views the media as independent. Pondok Baitul Makmur also leverages local media to strengthen the credibility of clarifications. When a hoax impacts the institution's reputation, the public relations department collaborates with local online media to publish official explanations. The presence of the media as an external party increases public trust in the clarifications, as they are perceived as coming from independent sources.

### **5) Digital Literacy Builds Long-Term Resilience**

A digitally literate community is more resilient to hoaxes, increasing the effectiveness of public relations strategies structurally, not just situationally. Baitul Makmur began introducing digital literacy to students and their guardians through brief training sessions on how to recognize hoaxes and the importance of verifying information. This effort has been proven to increase the community's awareness of disinformation, thus helping to create a more resilient Islamic boarding school environment in the long term.

### **6) Branding Strengthens Public Trust**

A strong reputation leads the public to prioritize official information from an institution over wild rumors. Branding is the foundation for the long-term effectiveness of all public relations strategies. The Baitul Makmur Tahfidzul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School has a strong reputation in the community as a disciplined and high-achieving Qur'an memorization institution. This positive branding makes the public more likely to trust official information from the Islamic boarding school over circulating hoaxes. Thus, the power of branding serves as a foundation that strengthens all public relations strategies in maintaining public trust and the institution's stability.

## **DISCUSSION | مناقشة**

The findings of this study indicate that the spread of hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools is not merely incidental, but rather a systemic phenomenon that arises from the interaction between the characteristics of Islamic boarding schools, the digital behavior of the community, and the algorithmic mechanisms of social media. In the context of the research objectives namely, to identify the forms and patterns of dissemination, and to formulate public relations strategies to counter information distortion the results obtained have important theoretical and practical significance.

First, this study confirms that the high sensitivity of issues inherent in Islamic boarding schools (violence, radicalism, the integrity of religious leaders, and the health of students) makes these institutions more vulnerable to hoaxes. This is in line with the findings of Santoso et al. (2025) and Nadzifah & Listyani (2025), who stated that religious and moral issues have a high viral potential because they easily trigger emotional responses from the public. However, this study deepens this understanding by showing that urban-based tahfidz Islamic boarding schools have different vulnerability dynamics than traditional Islamic boarding schools, primarily because digital interactions among urban communities are more intense and heterogeneous. Thus, the urban context becomes a crucial variable that amplifies the complexity of information distortion.

Second, the pattern of hoax distribution found in this study confirms the central role of algorithm-driven digital ecosystems, as also discussed by Rahmanto et al. (2022). However, this study's findings expand on this perspective by demonstrating how algorithms operate in real-world settings in the case of Islamic boarding schools: posts containing emotions (anger, fear, pity) receive high engagement and are therefore prioritized in content distribution. This implies that hoaxes are not only a digital ethics issue but also a structural issue created by the platform's

design itself. Thus, the challenges for Islamic boarding school public relations are increasingly complex, as they must navigate a non-neutral information distribution system.

Third, the impacts of hoaxes identified in this study ranging from anxiety among students' guardians to the erosion of institutional reputation reaffirm the conclusions of previous studies (Fauzi et al., 2025; Mutmainnah et al., 2024) that hoaxes have a multidimensional destructive power. However, this study adds a new dimension in the form of internal impacts on Islamic boarding school harmony, such as tensions between students or teachers' doubts about leadership. This strengthens the argument that hoaxes are not only an external problem but also a threat to the internal social stability of institutions.

Fourth, findings regarding public relations strategies indicate that the effectiveness of an institution's response is highly dependent on the speed, transparency, and consistency of communication. This is in line with research by Asfia & Sari (2024), Ismail & Yahya (2024), and Putra & Fachruddin (2024), but this study provides new empirical evidence that such strategies must be integrated with institutional branding and community digital literacy to have a long-term impact. The case of the Baitul Makmur Tahfidzul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Malang shows that positive branding makes the public more rational when facing negative issues, thereby strengthening the institution's reputational resilience, as supported by the findings of Hidayati (2025).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings indicate that the concept of Islamic boarding school public relations cannot be understood solely through a traditional public relations framework, but must be linked to digital crisis management theory, the psychology of public perception, and information distribution algorithms. Thus, this study provides a new conceptual foundation that Islamic boarding school public relations needs to transform into entities that are not only communicative, but also analytical, responsive, and data-oriented.

From a practical perspective, these findings underscore the need to establish professional public relations units in Islamic boarding schools with the capacity to implement early warning systems, digital monitoring, strategic content production, and collaboration with the mass media. Implementing digital literacy for Islamic boarding school communities is also an urgent need, as resistance to hoaxes is impossible if the institution's members lack the ability to verify information. Overall, this study demonstrates that the spread of hoaxes about Islamic boarding schools is not simply a communication issue, but a structural issue concerning the relationship between Islamic boarding schools and the digital community. These findings support the proposition that adaptive public relations strategies based on data, rapid response, and strengthening branding are the most effective approaches to countering information distortion. This research also emphasizes that public relations success depends not only on communication strategies but also on the readiness of the institutional ecosystem to respond to digital dynamics. Therefore, the main contribution of this study lies in integrating the analysis of hoax forms, virality patterns, and public relations strategies into a single conceptual framework that can serve as a foundation for further research and practical implementation in other Islamic boarding schools.

## CONCLUSSION

## خاتمة

Based on the discussion outlined above, it can be concluded that the rapid development of Information and Communication Technology in the digital age has created a dynamic information ecosystem that is also vulnerable to the spread of digital disinformation, including

that targeting Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as Islamic educational institutions with high levels of social, religious, and moral sensitivity. Various forms of disinformation ranging from allegations of violence and radicalism to visual manipulation, attacks on the reputation of Islamic scholars, and health-related issues spread through complex digital mechanisms that leverage anonymous accounts, closed groups, and social media algorithms designed to amplify the spread of emotionally charged content. This situation leaves Islamic boarding schools vulnerable to reputational crises and a decline in public trust if not addressed appropriately. A case study at the Baitul Makmur Tahfidzul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Malang shows that public relations strategies supported by crisis management through early issue detection, swift and transparent clarification, strengthening digital literacy, and collaboration with the community are crucial steps in controlling the spread of disinformation while safeguarding the institution's reputation. This study enriches the body of research on crisis communication in Islamic educational institutions by integrating analyses of the characteristics of digital disinformation, social media dynamics, and public relations strategies into a single, context-specific conceptual framework.

In practical terms, the findings of this study serve as the basis for developing more adaptive communication strategies to address the challenges of the digital age. In addition to strengthening public relations capacity at the pesantren level, policy support is needed from umbrella organizations for pesantren such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah as well as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to develop guidelines or standard protocols for handling disinformation and crisis communication that can be implemented by Islamic educational institutions. It is hoped that these guidelines will strengthen coordination, accelerate responses to the spread of disinformation, and enhance the reputational resilience of Islamic boarding schools as they navigate the increasingly complex dynamics of digital communication.

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