

STRATEGY FOR OVERCOMING THE COMMUNITY'S NEGATIVE IMAGE TOWARD ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

Umlina Mukhlas,¹ Nur Rohim Yunus,² Faiqatul Husna³

Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta

Institut Islam Salahuddin al-Ayubi (Inisa) Bekasi, Indonesia

Email: umlina.bae23@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id, nurrohimyunus@uinjkt.ac.id,
faiqohhusna.inisa@gmail.com

Abstract

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), as long-established Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, continue to encounter a negative public image that characterizes them as closed, rigid, and insufficiently responsive to contemporary issues such as radicalism, narcotics, violence, and bullying. These perceptions are largely shaped by media portrayals that emphasize isolated incidents without presenting positive daily realities, as well as by limited public understanding of pesantren's commitment to moderate Islamic values, including tolerance and empathy. As a result, the capacity of pesantren to function as agents of character formation and social transformation is weakened. This study adopts a mixed-method approach combining surveys, in-depth interviews with pesantren leaders, alumni, and community members, and a literature review to identify the roots of stigma and strategies for addressing it. The research is grounded in philosophical, sociological, and juridical perspectives, including Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, which highlights innovation and institutional recognition. The findings show that stigma reduction is most effective when pesantren modernizes curricula by integrating science and technology, implements digital communication to build positive narratives, establishes counseling-based anti-bullying programs, and fosters partnerships with government and communities, including narcotics prevention initiatives. These efforts strengthen public trust and reinforce pesantren as inclusive and safe learning environments. The study concludes that overcoming negative imagery requires collaborative, consistent, and evidence-based strategies to position pesantren as relevant and competitive pillars of national education capable of nurturing a morally grounded generation.

Keywords: Pesantren; Negative Image; Mitigation

(*) Corresponding Author: Umlina Mukhlas, umlina.bae23@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id

A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have long shaped character and religious knowledge in Indonesia, yet modern societal views often stereotype them as rigid, closed, and poorly aligned with contemporary needs. Misconceptions about curricula seen as focused only on religion and lacking science, technology, and social skills reinforce perceptions that pesantren are unprepared to address issues such as drugs, radicalism, and mental health. This negative image weakens their reputation and limits their role in preparing a competitive and socially responsible generation. To counter this, pesantren must demonstrate relevance through proactive initiatives, including drug awareness programs with legal counseling, workshops, and prevention teams. Collaboration with

government and communities can shift public perception, enabling pesantren to function as adaptive, socially engaged institutions that contribute to national progress. (Amin et al., 2022)

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have long been central to Indonesia's educational and cultural tradition, shaping students with moral values and strong character. However, in recent decades they have faced growing negative perceptions, especially related to bullying, violence, and assumptions that pesantren lack safe and supportive learning environments. Media reporting often highlights isolated incidents without context, overshadowing the pesantren's intended role in fostering tolerance, empathy, and balanced religious and general knowledge. This stigma is worsened by limited public understanding and the lack of promotion of pesantren achievements, despite many alumni succeeding in diverse fields. As a result, pesantren's reputation and potential as agents of social change are weakened. Addressing this requires coordinated strategies, improved educational standards, promotion of moderation, and stronger communication to rebuild trust and reinforce pesantren's relevance. (Arfah & Wantini, 2023)

The philosophical basis for addressing negative perceptions of pesantren lies in Islamic educational principles that promote holistic human development, spiritually, intellectually, and socially. Rooted in Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings, pesantren are intended to cultivate noble character, tolerance, empathy, and balanced mastery of religious and general knowledge, aiming to form insan kamil capable of contributing to modern society. Negative public views related to bullying, violence, and a lack of character formation distort this ideal, driven by media narratives and limited recognition of pesantren achievements. The gap between educational ideals and public perception reinforces stigma and mistrust. Therefore, restoring the philosophical essence requires integrating inclusive curricula, strengthening moderate and humanistic values, and promoting success stories to rebuild confidence and reaffirm pesantren's role in shaping a high-quality, socially harmonious generation. (Maskuri, 2024)

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) play an important role in shaping students' character and moral development, which can be analyzed through educational sociology that views education as a socialization process influenced by norms, values, and interaction patterns. However, negative perceptions often arise due to reports of bullying, intolerance, and misconduct, creating a contrast between Islamic values and observed behavior. Sociological theories such as symbolic interactionism, social conflict, and Goffman's stigma concept explain how limited information and media narratives generate stereotypes portraying pesantren as rigid or isolated, leading to public distrust. Internal group dynamics and hierarchical structures may contribute to problematic behavior if not managed well. Therefore, addressing negative perceptions requires sociological strategies, including awareness-building, open dialogue, evaluation, and stakeholder engagement, to reduce stigma and strengthen pesantren's role as agents of social transformation within national education. (Azkalakum Zakiyullah & Ainur Rofiq Sofa, 2024)

Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren provides the legal basis for overcoming negative public perceptions by affirming pesantren as part of the national education system with a mandate to develop individuals of faith, piety, and noble character. The law positions pesantren as strategic institutions for national moral formation, requiring them to preserve Islamic values while adapting to social, cultural, and technological developments, thereby countering stereotypes of being outdated or closed. Provisions allowing participation in formal and non-formal education, community empowerment, and managerial innovation legitimize broader collaboration and the integration of general sciences with religious studies. Based on this legal framework, strategies such as social

media engagement, transparency in accreditation, and institutional partnerships are recognized as lawful measures to strengthen trust and reinforce pesantren as inclusive, relevant, and transformative educational actors. (Samudera, 2023)

The urgency of this study arises from the tangible impacts of negative stigma toward pesantren, including declining enrollment interest, reduced social and financial support, and the threat of marginalization within the national education system. In an era of rapid technological and social change, pesantren are often viewed as isolated, lacking transparency, and disconnected from modern realities, allowing media narratives and limited public understanding to erode trust and hinder collaboration. This study is necessary to map root causes through surveys, interviews, and literature reviews, and to identify issues such as weak information disclosure, limited community interaction, and unfavorable media framing. It also seeks to formulate operational strategies, modernize curricula, expand partnerships, strengthen educational campaigns, and enhance digital initiatives to transform stigma into support and reaffirm pesantren as relevant, inclusive, and competitive institutions committed to forming virtuous and adaptive future generations. (Susanto, 2019)

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, which combines Islamic values with contemporary intervention strategies to address negative perceptions of pesantren, particularly regarding bullying, inclusivity, and psychological support. Unlike studies that focus only on modernization or curriculum reform, this research emphasizes character education grounded in Islamic principles such as justice, empathy, and tolerance, supported by practical implementation in daily school life. Innovation occurs at three levels: integrating Islamic values with structured anti-bullying policies and reporting systems; psychological interventions through counseling, conflict-resolution training, and mental-health literacy; and community engagement with parents, alumni, and local leaders to build a preventive, inclusive culture. The study also highlights inclusivity as a reputation-building strategy, promoting diversity protection and leveraging government support. Through this holistic model, pesantren are positioned as safe, empathetic, and competitive educational environments aligned with modern needs. (Arfah & Wantini, 2023)

METHODS

The research employed a qualitative method. This approach was chosen because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, particularly the community's negative perceptions of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and the factors contributing to these stigmas. The qualitative method allows the researcher to explore experiences, perspectives, and social interactions among various stakeholders, including administrators of Islamic boarding schools, students, alumni, and the surrounding community. Data collection techniques may include in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), participatory observations, and document analysis. By utilizing a qualitative approach, the researcher can capture the nuances of perception, social dynamics, and cultural contexts that shape the image of Islamic boarding schools, ensuring that the strategies developed are realistic, contextual, and applicable in efforts to improve the institution's reputation and enhance its relevance in modern society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Identification of Sources and Forms of Negative Image

The formation of an unfavorable image of pesantren generally stems from four primary sources: media coverage, individual experiences, limited access to information, and the emergence of specific cases that attract public attention. First, both mass media and digital platforms often present biased representations by focusing on incidents

deemed dramatic or newsworthy, such as allegations of violence, conspicuous disciplinary violations, or indirect associations with radicalism. This pattern of reporting tends to overshadow the positive aspects of pesantren, including teaching and learning processes, character development, social activities, and academic achievements. As a result, negative narratives spread quickly and strongly influence public perception, leading people to form opinions based on isolated cases rather than the more varied and constructive realities of daily life.(Entman, 1993)

In the long term, such patterns of reporting have the potential to produce a cultivation effect, in which the public comes to generalize the media's portrayal as an accurate reflection of the overall social reality of the pesantren.(Morgan & Shanahan, 2010) Secondly, personal experiences or testimonies from alumni and family members regarding strict discipline, limited facilities, or authoritative interactions are easily perceived as representative "evidence," reinforced by availability heuristics and internal attributions of the incidents.(Weiner, 1985) Thirdly, the lack of structured information regarding curriculum, accreditation, academic achievements, and alumni networks creates a narrative vacuum that is often filled by stereotypes, such as the perception that pesantren are "anti-science" or closed off.(Lukens-Bull, 2001) Fourthly, specific issues such as sanitation, dormitory security, or sporadic but high-impact cases of sexual abuse can amplify the perception of a reputational crisis if they are not addressed with transparent communication.

The range of negative perceptions surrounding pesantren can be categorized into several public perception dimensions. First, pesantren are often labeled as highly conservative, leading to the belief that they are less responsive to modernization, diversity, and inclusive educational practices. Second, they are sometimes associated with violence, ranging from physical discipline and bullying among students to alleged links with radical ideologies, even if such incidents are merely isolated. Third, some members of the public perceive the academic quality of pesantren as low, assuming that subjects such as science, information technology, foreign languages, and 21st-century skills receive insufficient attention. Fourth, pesantren are viewed as isolated and closed environments, with limited social interaction with the surrounding community. These constructed perceptions collectively form a stigma that significantly affects public trust.(Lukens-Bull, 2001)

The findings of this study align with the frameworks of communication science and reputation management. The formation of public image can be understood through the concepts of framing and cultivation, which explain how repeated messages and specific patterns of representation shape collective perceptions. At the same time, reputation management and crisis response require measured actions grounded in data, empathetic dialogue, and clarifications to correct misinformation. In this context, strategies such as evidence-based denial, corrective measures, and rebuild approaches, as outlined in Situational Crisis Communication Theory, are highly relevant. Strengthening reputation also necessitates managing public trust assets through transparency, message consistency, and active stakeholder engagement. Thus, improving a negative image must address both the perception-shaping factors and the substantive root causes concurrently.(Coombs, 2007) (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997)

2. Effectiveness of the Countermeasures Implemented

The Effectiveness of Implemented Countermeasures highlights four mutually reinforcing strategies: open houses, achievement publicity, social media use, and partnerships with government and community stakeholders. Evaluative data from the literature indicate that open houses through school visits, facility tours, and open dialogues consistently shift public perceptions by fostering positive intergroup contact,

reducing stereotypes, and enabling direct verification of service quality. (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) This effect is enhanced when interactions are designed to be dialogic, responsive, and provide opportunities for feedback. (Kent & Taylor, 1998) The publication of achievements, such as accreditation, academic accomplishments, curriculum innovations, and alumni placements, reinforces the competence and credibility dimension of reputation, particularly when these indicators can be audited and contextualized within impact stories. (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997) Social media extends the reach and speed of clarifications; attitude shifts are more pronounced when accounts are managed interactively, combining information, community engagement, and calls to action, while linking to expert sources to correct misinformation. (K. Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) Partnerships with government and the community, through service programs, certifications, scholarships, and curriculum collaborations, can enhance pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy, thereby normalizing the role of pesantren within the public ecosystem. (Suchman, 1995)

Compared with other strategies, the combination of regularly held open houses and interactive social media management is the most effective for improving the pesantren's image, as it integrates two complementary approaches. Open houses allow the public to directly observe facilities, educational processes, the social environment, and interactions between students and teachers, providing tangible cues of quality that can be verified firsthand. Meanwhile, communicative and responsive social media management facilitates continuous interaction, strengthens emotional engagement, builds public trust, and enhances readiness in addressing potential information crises. Together, these approaches enable pesantren not only to demonstrate transparency but also to manage public perception dynamically and consistently. (Kent & Taylor, 1998)

The challenges faced encompass both strategic and technical aspects, ranging from limited content production capacity to uneven digital literacy among pesantren administrators and community members. Additionally, the lack of standardized crisis communication procedures often leads to delayed or uncoordinated responses to negative issues. Message consistency across different units also poses a challenge, as variations in communication style and narrative can create public confusion. Furthermore, gaps in access and digital participation among specific audiences, particularly rural communities or groups less familiar with technology, restrict the effectiveness of information dissemination and outreach. All these obstacles need to be anticipated through structured communication planning and internal capacity building. (Coombs, 2007)

To enhance effectiveness, pesantrens need to establish measurable outcome indicators, such as public reputation, levels of community trust, and intentions to visit or enroll as new students. Additionally, clear crisis response protocols are necessary so that pesantrens can address rumors, misinformation, or negative issues quickly and in a coordinated, consistent manner. Implementing organizational listening practices is also crucial; this entails the institution's ability to systematically hear, monitor, and understand the community's aspirations, complaints, and perceptions. In this way, all communication strategies can be data-driven, more empathetic, and aligned with audience needs, making the management of pesantren's image more adaptive, credible, and sustainable. (Macnamara, n.d.)

3. Change of Perception and Its Impact

Evaluations show that open house activities, achievement publications, and interactive social media reduce negative perceptions and increase public trust. Pre-post measurements indicate significant attitude improvements when communities gain direct experience and transparent information, with research and meta-analyses confirming consistent, moderate, and stable positive shifts through intergroup contact and dialogic

communication. (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) (Kent & Taylor, 1998) Trust and legitimacy increase when institutions show competence, accountability, and transparency, reflecting pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Reputation improves when stakeholders observe consistent performance and alignment between claims and practice. Thus, credibility depends not on narrative alone but on measurable evidence of integrity, professionalism, and commitment to public service. (Suchman, 1995) (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997)

Interviews with community leaders after visits and open house activities revealed apparent narrative shifts that corrected stereotypes about academic quality, information access, and transparency. Respondents also reported improved perceptions of safety and management, indicating that firsthand experience and open communication create more profound perceptual change than secondary information or public opinion. (Raihani, 2013) Image shifts are reflected in behavioral changes, including increased interest in enrollment, more public inquiries and visits, expanded community support through donations and volunteerism, and growing external partnerships. These developments indicate rising credibility, aligning with research showing that reputation and direct experience strongly influence educational choice and stakeholder engagement. (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) In the nonprofit sector, increased trust is closely associated with higher levels of participation and support. The variables most strongly linked to shifts in perception include: high-quality direct contact (interaction intensity and valence), verifiable evidence of competence (accreditation, academic achievements, alumni placement), transparency in handling sensitive issues (timely crisis response), and consistent two-way dialogue on social media. When these variables are strengthened, perceptions shift from negative stereotypes to data-driven evaluations, which in turn foster greater support and cross-stakeholder collaboration. (Sargeant & Lee, 2004) (K. Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012)

4. Communication and Branding Strategies of Islamic Boarding Schools

The communication and branding strategies of Islamic boarding schools present a consistent, structured set of key messages that portray the institutions as modern, credible, and relevant to societal needs. First, the schools emphasize the integration of religious and general knowledge, along with measurable academic quality reflected in accreditation, competition achievements, and curriculum performance. Second, narratives highlighting character education, the cultivation of proper manners, and the development of student independence are continuously stressed as primary differentiators. Third, aspects of safety, dormitory management, learning environment comfort, and compliance with government regulations are communicated to address public concerns. Fourth, the schools demonstrate openness, transparency, and active partnerships with the community, businesses, and government. Fifth, alumni networks, professional achievements, and social contributions are presented as evidence of successful student development.

The communication platforms commonly employed by pesantren extend beyond open houses and community visits to include official websites serving as information hubs for curriculum details, facilities, student admissions, and policy announcements. Social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are used for storytelling about student life, parental testimonials, documenting achievements, and clarifying circulating issues. Additionally, local mass media amplify coverage of awards, accreditation, and social contributions, thereby enhancing public visibility. Cross-institutional partnership forums, including collaborations with schools, universities, businesses, and local governments, are also leveraged to build external credibility. This approach aligns with nonprofit organizational practices that integrate informational

content, community engagement, and calls to action through digital channels in a cohesive manner.(K. Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) (W. S. Lovejoy, 2012)

Compared to the ideals of public relations, some pesantren have begun adopting more dialogic and responsive engagement patterns through parent forums, social media issue clarifications, and the involvement of community leaders in open activities. However, these practices still reveal gaps in achieving a truly symmetrical two-way communication model. Attaining this standard requires ongoing public research to map stakeholder perceptions, concerns, and expectations systematically. Furthermore, feedback mechanisms must be designed to go beyond symbolic consultation and genuinely inform managerial decision-making processes, including policies on dormitories, security, and educational service quality. Consistency of messaging across both offline and digital channels is also a crucial prerequisite for building long-term trust, transparency, and legitimacy.(Grunig & Grunig, 2013)

For branding purposes, highlighting distinctive values such as character education, independence, and discipline can be positioned as a value proposition that aligns with parents' expectations regarding moral development, study ethic, and life readiness, while also meeting industry partners' needs for graduates who demonstrate integrity, collaboration, and strong soft skills. Strategically, these values should be translated into clear brand attributes so the public can recognize the pesantren's differentiation from other educational institutions. These attributes should ideally be reinforced with verifiable evidence, such as accreditation, quality standards, alumni tracer studies, and stakeholder testimonials. Furthermore, all these elements must be communicated consistently across channels to build, enhance, and sustain the institutional brand equity.(Keller, 1993)

The mechanism of public identification with the institution, through narratives of students' social roles, community service programs, and alumni success stories, fosters a more profound emotional attachment and trust. When the community observes students engaging in social services, community education, or humanitarian responses, the pesantren is perceived as part of the social solution rather than a closed entity. Similarly, alumni achievements in academic, professional, or entrepreneurial fields provide concrete evidence that pesantren education is relevant to contemporary needs. Such narratives cultivate pride, a sense of shared identity, and recognition of tangible contributions. Ultimately, consistently communicated positive stories expand the public's psychological ownership, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and enhance organic support and advocacy for the institution.(Bhattacharya & Sen, n.d.)

During crises or sensitive issues, applying principles of transparency, empathy, and corrective action helps maintain brand coherence. It prevents reputational erosion, as the public evaluates not only the substance of the problem but also the institution's response. Open explanations, prompt clarifications, and acknowledgment of public concerns create the impression that the pesantren is responsible and well-governed. This approach reduces speculation, mitigates rumors, and restores perceptions of safety and accountability. In short, the combination of pesantren-specific value-based messaging, auditable performance evidence (such as accreditation, safety standards, and academic achievements), and two-way communication across platforms that enables dialogue and public feedback forms the foundation of a resilient and adaptive positive brand.(Coombs, 2007)

5. The Role of Stakeholders in Shaping Image

Stakeholders collectively shape the pesantren's image through complementary roles. Parents assess service quality and safety, alumni provide credibility through success and testimonials, and community leaders and media influence public narratives.

Government support through certification and partnerships further strengthens trust, accountability, and broader acceptance of the institution. (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) Alumni become credible ambassadors due to their strong identification with the pesantren, driving advocacy, referrals, and defense during crises. Authentic testimonials strengthen perceptions of educational effectiveness. Through professional networks, mentoring, campus activities, and social media, alumni expand message reach and protect the institution's reputation by bridging communication, countering misinformation, and reassuring the public with persuasive prudence. (Bhattacharya & Sen, n.d.)

Community leaders strengthen legitimacy through endorsements, partnerships, and acting as communication bridges in local forums. Joint programs demonstrate the pesantren's social contributions, increasing trust and reducing resistance. Their support opens the door to collaboration with local government, shaping perceptions of the pesantren as relevant, inclusive, and adaptive, and fostering social cohesion and community welfare. (Suchman, 1995) (Raihani, 2013) Local media shape public perception of educational and religious issues. Favorable coverage highlighting achievements, alumni, social initiatives, and transparent reporting reduces stereotypes and builds trust. Solution journalism, press access, and fact-checking strengthen accountability, while sensational or unverified content harms reputation, making proactive partnerships essential for fair and balanced public narratives. (Entman, 1993)

Government strengthens pesantren legitimacy through accreditation, certification, scholarships, oversight, and incentives that boost trust and enrollment. Partnerships for curriculum, internships, teacher training, and digital skills align outcomes with workforce needs. Transparent evaluation and performance reporting reinforce accountability, signaling institutional quality to parents, prospective students, and broader stakeholders. (Helgesen & Nasset, 2007) Stakeholder synergy is strengthened through coordinated dialogue and shared crisis protocols to ensure consistent, data-based messaging; a unified narrative combining performance evidence, testimonials, media coverage, and endorsements to build trust; and alumni-driven brand communities that enhance emotional identification, advocacy, and sustainable student referrals. (McAlexander et al., 2002)

Positioning alumni as ambassadors is effective because their authentic experiences serve as credible social proof that strengthens perceptions of educational quality, dormitory culture, and career outcomes, while expanding message reach through networks and social media. Alumni also bridge communication during sensitive issues, clarifying information, and reducing misinformation. Studies show strong alumni identification drives advocacy, referrals, and prosocial support. With coordinated, dialogic communication and clear engagement metrics, this alumni coalition forms a resilient reputation safeguard that adapts to issue pressures and shifts in public opinion. (Bhattacharya & Sen, n.d.) (Balaji et al., 2016)

6. Recommendations for Developing an Image Management Model

The recommendations emphasize strengthening and harmonizing image management through four strategies. Expanding direct engagement, such as open houses, community visits, and "a day with santri," reduces stereotypes through meaningful contact. Publishing academic and non-academic achievements via storytelling, infographics, and media reinforces credibility. Optimizing digital platforms broadens reach, clarifies misinformation, and promotes two-way interaction. Collaboration with government, community leaders, and local institutions enhances legitimacy and demonstrates the pesantren's social contribution. (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997) (K. Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) (Suchman, 1995). Remaining weaknesses in image management include predominantly one-way institutional communication that

limits dialogue and feedback, and undocumented crisis procedures that produce inconsistent, ad hoc responses. Communication content varies in accuracy, aesthetics, and narrative strength, reducing persuasive impact. Limited digital literacy hampers effective use of online platforms and analytics, while the absence of standardized indicators and monitoring metrics prevents proper evaluation, continuous improvement, and systematic reputational accountability. (Kent & Taylor, 1998) (Coombs, 2007) (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014)

The proposed “Dialogic–Legitimacy–Reputation (DLR) Cycle” model is an iterative and adaptive image management framework supported by systematic monitoring. Its first stage, the Dialogic Pillar, shifts the institution toward symmetrical two-way communication grounded in organizational listening to capture public concerns and expectations. Implementation includes face-to-face forums with stakeholders and digital tools such as interactive Q&A, chatbots, surveys, and sentiment analytics to build trust, guide policy, and prevent perception gaps from becoming reputational problems. (Kent & Taylor, 1998) (Macnamara, n.d.) The second pillar, Legitimacy, strengthens public acceptance by providing clear and accessible evidence of institutional quality. Beyond administrative compliance, it highlights accreditation, safety standards, and governance audits as pragmatic legitimacy. Moral legitimacy is built through ethics, community service, inclusivity, and character development, while cognitive legitimacy grows through government cooperation, community engagement, research, and alumni success. Integrating these dimensions secures trust and social acceptance, forming a durable foundation for sustaining and improving reputation. (Suchman, 1995) The third pillar, Reputation, focuses on building a positive image through curated narratives highlighting achievements, educational quality, and students’ character. Consistent messaging across websites, social media, publications, media coverage, and promotional materials ensures a convincing public portrayal. Reputation grows stronger when validated by third parties, especially alumni who act as ambassadors through testimonials, career success, and social contributions. This multi-layered strategy reinforces that pesantren education delivers real outcomes and creates perceptions resilient to issues and competition. (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997) (Balaji et al., 2016)

Conclusion

Research on strategies to counter negative public perceptions of Islamic boarding schools shows that these views are socially constructed and shaped by media framing, limited information, and isolated cases that overshadow positive daily realities. Stereotypes portraying pesantren as rigid, outdated, intolerant, or associated with violence weaken public trust, reduce social support, and diminish enrollment interest, thereby affecting their legitimacy within the national education system. The study finds that the most effective response is an integrated strategy combining transparency, community engagement, evidence-based demonstrations of quality, and two-way public communication. Open house activities help correct assumptions through direct experience, while showcasing student and alumni achievements strengthens perceptions of academic excellence. Responsively managed social media clarifies misinformation and builds emotional affinity, and partnerships with government and community actors enhance institutional legitimacy. The research concludes that image improvement requires institutional transformation—professional governance, safety, inclusivity, and alignment of moderate Islamic values with 21st-century competencies—positioning pesantren as adaptive, relevant, and socially transformative institutions.

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