

Digital Marketing Strategies for Enhancing Branding in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Comprehensive Analysis

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ABSTRACT. This study examines various digital marketing strategies that can improve branding efforts in *pesantren*. The research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze digital marketing strategies in improving branding in *pesantren*. The findings show that integrating traditional values with modern digital innovations can significantly increase the effectiveness of branding efforts in *pesantren*. In addition, community engagement through various outreach programs increases the social impact of these institutions and strengthens their position as significant contributors to local economic development. The discussion highlighted five key strategies: strengthening a unique identity, leveraging digital media, developing flagship programs, building strategic partnerships, and engaging the community in social initiatives. Each strategy is critical to strengthening the educational mission of *pesantren* while fostering a deeper relationship with the surrounding community. This study concludes that *pesantren* equipped with a solid digital marketing approach and a clear strategic direction can improve their branding and educational effectiveness. Future research is recommended to investigate the specific impact of community empowerment programs and the utilization of digital technology on the quality of education in *pesantren*, as well as longitudinal studies to assess the long-term success of the strategic partnerships formed by these institutions.

Keywords: Branding, community involvement, digital marketing, Islamic boarding schools

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, branding has become a key element in the management strategy of educational institutions, including in the context of Islamic education such as *pesantren* (Rofi & Kusumawati, 2020; Rizkiyah et al., 2020; Ramadhani & Setyowati, 2023). Effective branding not only increases the visibility and competitiveness of the institution but also plays an essential role in building a solid identity and attracting prospective students (Hidayatun, 2017; Joseph et al., 2017). *Pesantren*, as one of the pillars of Islamic education in Indonesia, has unique characteristics that combine traditional values with Islamic-based educational practices (Masqon, 2011; Khaeroni et al., 2021; Baharun et al., 2021; Hanafi et al., 2021; Sista & Sodikin, 2022; Hastasari et al., 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2023). However, technological developments and social changes require *pesantren* to adapt to modern dynamics without sacrificing their traditional identity (Kurniawati & Anshory, 2024). Therefore, implementing a branding strategy that can bridge the values of tradition and modernity is essential to ensure the sustainability of *pesantren* in this digital era.

Today, marketing strategies in educational institutions are increasingly focusing on using digital technology, known as digital marketing (Singh, 2017; Aimah et al., 2024). Digital marketing

encompasses a variety of marketing efforts conducted through internet-connected devices, using various digital strategies and media to interact with potential customers through online communication channels (Sun, 2022). The main advantages of digital marketing are its lower cost efficiency than traditional marketing methods and its ability to reach a broader and more diverse audience (Qian et al., 2023). In addition, digital marketing offers greater flexibility, allowing marketers to continuously adjust their products and strategies according to dynamic market needs (Malik, 2017). With more types of digital platforms and online media available, people's access to the internet has also increased significantly in the past five years, expanding the reach and potential impact of digital marketing. The trend of internet and social media users has grown dramatically (Figure 1).

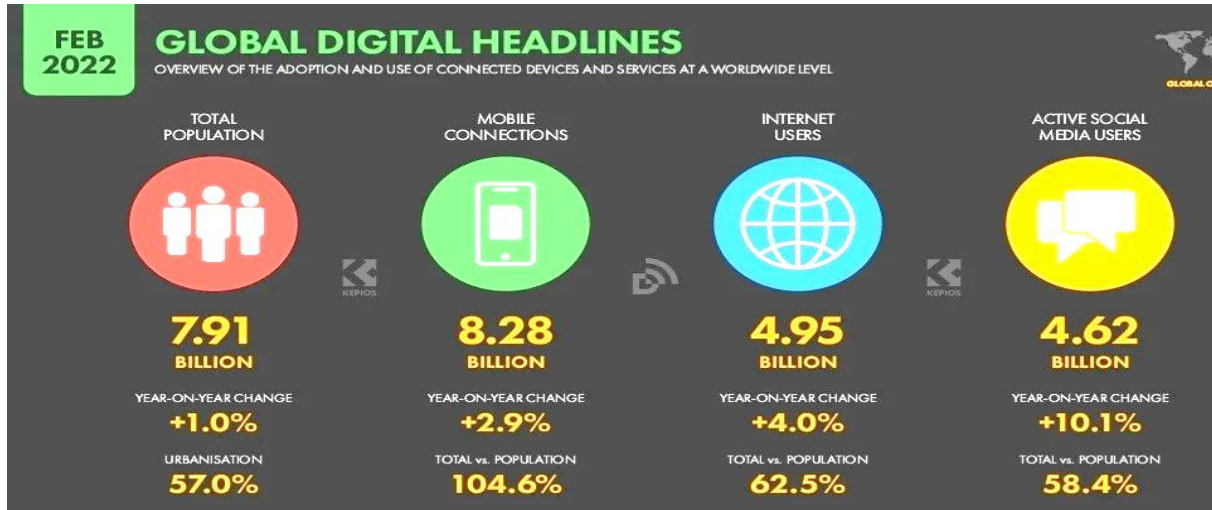


Figure 1: Data and Trends of Internet and Social Media Users in 2022 Worldwide. *Source:* <https://andi.link/hootsuite-we-are-social-indonesian-digital-report-2022/>

Based on Figure 1 above, the global population reached 7.91 billion in 2021, a 1% increase from 7.83 billion in the previous year. Connected mobile devices totalled 8.28 billion, a 2.9% increase from 5.22 billion in 2021. Global internet users reached 4.95 billion, a 4% increase from 4.66 billion in the previous year, while active social media users reached 4.62 billion, up 10.1% from 4.20 billion in 2021. This data shows a significant trend in internet usage worldwide, including in Indonesia, which is experiencing a significant increase in internet media usage.

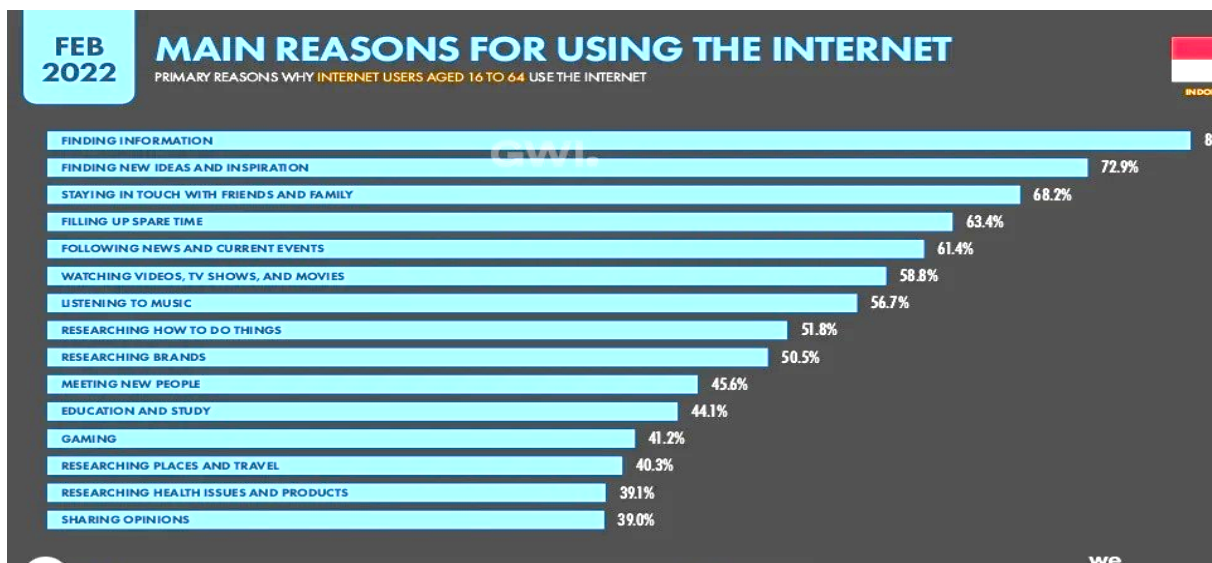


Figure 2: Reasons for Internet Usage in Indonesia. *Source:* <https://andi.link/hootsuite-we-are-social-indonesian-digital-report-2022/>

Data from 2022 shows that 80.1% of Indonesians utilize the Internet as a source of information, while 72.9% use it to find new ideas and inspiration. In addition, 68.2% of the online population connects with friends and family through the Internet. 63.4% use the Internet to fill their free time, and 58.8% access the Internet to watch videos, movies, and television programs. This trend is also evident in the use of social media in Indonesia, which shows significant growth every year. These factors reflect the changing patterns of media consumption and social interaction in the digital age, emphasizing the importance of online platforms in everyday life.

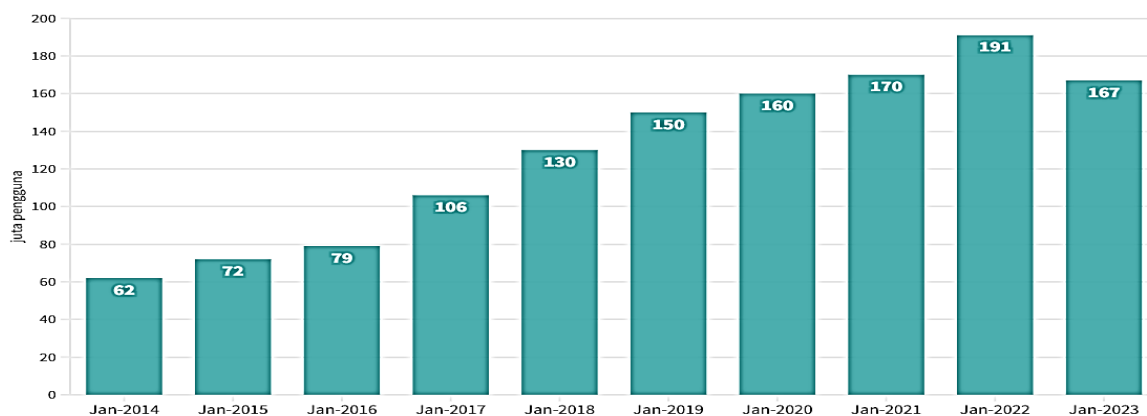


Figure 3: Social Media Users in Indonesia. Source: <https://andi.link/hootsuite-we-are-social-indonesian-digital-report-2022/>

Figure 3 shows that in January 2023, there were 167 million active social media users in Indonesia, equivalent to 60.4% of the total population. On the other hand, the number of internet users in Indonesia reached 212.9 million in the same period, showing an increase of 3.85% over the previous year. The vast majority, 98.3% of internet users, use mobile phones as their primary device. On average, individuals in Indonesia spend about 7 hours and 42 minutes every day accessing the internet. By January 2022, around 77% of the population, or 277.7 million people, actively use the internet for various needs. The development of information technology in Indonesia shows a significant trend, confirming the need for educational institutions to utilize digital marketing actively. Given the intense competition in digital marketing, especially in the education sector, *pesantren* must adopt digital branding strategies by utilizing various social media platforms to reach and communicate with the broader community.

Islamic boarding schools (*Pesantren*), as traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, face significant challenges in attracting new students and maintaining their relevance in the modern era (Zakaria, 2010; Halim, 2018; Anggadwita et al., 2021; Mutawally, 2023; Kardi et al., 2023). Although *pesantren* play an essential role in character building and religious education (Susanto et al., 2023; Shiddiq et al., 2024; Subekhan & Suryapermana, 2024), many *pesantren* struggle to communicate their unique values to prospective students and parents. The inability to implement effective marketing strategies, the need to understand target market preferences, and gaps in the utilization of digital technology for promotion limit the ability of *pesantren* to compete with other educational institutions. The importance of effective marketing and branding strategies for Islamic educational institutions, including *pesantren*, is increasingly evident in the context of global competition. A study by Abuznaid (2012) confirmed that Islamic educational institutions need to adopt a more strategic and market-oriented marketing approach to remain relevant and competitive. This strategy should include the development of a strong brand identity, utilizing social and digital media to reach a wider audience, and emphasizing *Pesantren's* uniqueness and core values.

Research by Judson et al. (2006) highlights the importance of building relationships with stakeholders and communicating a clear value proposition in the branding of educational institutions. To remain relevant and practical, educational institutions must balance local cultural

values and global education trends. Adapting marketing strategies to the local context while embracing global influences is crucial to driving educational development. Asror et al. (2023), as explained by Rahman and Asrohah (2022) and Zulkarnain (2023), emphasized the importance of innovation in *pesantren* in facing the challenges of the 21st century. One of the challenges of *pesantren* in the 21st century is digital marketing. Therefore, this study aims to analyze effective digital marketing strategies for *pesantren*, focusing on integrating traditional values and modern marketing approaches to enhance the attractiveness and sustainability of increasingly competitive *pesantren*.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze digital marketing strategies for improving branding in *pesantren*. The research data were obtained from literature from Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, or ProQuest. The literature search used the keywords “digital marketing,” “branding,” “Islamic boarding schools,” “education marketing,” and “*pesantren*”. The search results were then limited based on relevance, year of publication, and direct relevance to the topic of this study. Data analysis involves assessing, organizing, and interpreting the collected literature to identify trends, patterns, gaps, and significant contributions to the study. The research method can be seen in Figure 4 in detail.

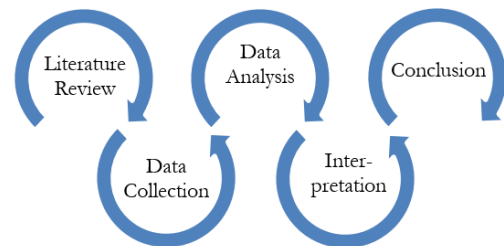


Figure 4 Research method

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This research shows that an effective branding strategy in *pesantren* requires a comprehensive approach involving both traditional and modern aspects. Maintaining the *pesantren's* distinctive values is important while adapting to contemporary educational needs and community expectations. The branding strategy carried out by the boarding school in branding the boarding school can perform several stages as follows:

First, strengthening a unique identity refers to developing and strengthening distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from other *pesantren*-based educational institutions. The steps that need to be taken to strengthen a unique identity include recognizing distinctive characteristics, communicating identity effectively, and forming programs with unique values. Strengthening the identity carried out by *pesantren* is in the characteristics of the curriculum and teaching methods as well as emphasizing the values of typical *pesantren* traditions such as learning the yellow book, habituation of character education that emphasizes the independence of students and the cultivation of Islamic values.

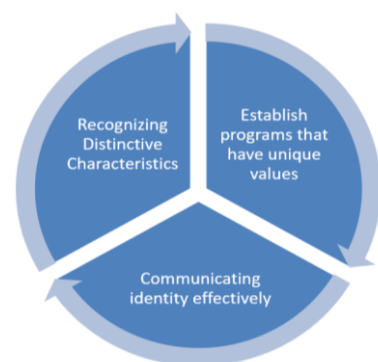


Figure 5 Identity Reinforcement

Second, the use of digital media. *Pesantren* must market and utilize technology to remain relevant and develop in the modern era. *Pesantren* can do branding by building an image among the community through various social media platforms such as websites, YouTube, Instagram, and email marketing. Marketing helps *pesantren* promote superior programs, attract new prospective students, and build a positive image in the community. Meanwhile, technology can improve the quality of education and administrative efficiency and expand the reach of *pesantren* preaching. The

use of digital media that needs to be done by *pesantren* is to optimize the *pesantren* website and social media by regularly creating educational and inspiring content in order to reach a wider community. In addition, *pesantren* can implement an Islamic boarding school management system, using e-learning to support learning and digitalization of learning resources. By combining traditional values and modern innovations, *pesantren* can strengthen their position as quality and competitive Islamic educational institutions.

Third, they are forming superior programs that differentiate them from other *pesantren*. Examples of excellent *pesantren* programs are 1) memorizing the Qur'an, 2) yellow books, 3) Arabic and English, 4) entrepreneurship (practical business training for students), 5) Islamic arts (development of calligraphy, tilawah, and *Nasyid* talents), 5) leadership training (leadership development program), 6) da'wah and public speaking (training in da'wah skills), 7) journalism (writing and media skills development program). With these excellent programs, it can shape students according to their interests and talents. When an Islamic boarding school has students and alumni who excel, it must be promoted.

Fourth, strategic partnerships should be formed by collaborating with other educational institutions and establishing cooperation with community leaders or public figures. The methods that can be used to create strategic partnerships among *pesantren* are: (1) identifying common goals, (2) mapping potential, (3) active communication, (4) designing joint programs, (5) formalizing cooperation, (6) gradual implementation, and (7) monitoring and evaluation.

Fifth, community involvement through activities that involve the surrounding community and provide social services to the community. *Pesantren* often involve the surrounding community through various activities, such as (1) general religious studies for residents, (2) social service and social service programs, (3) providing educational facilities for the general public, (4) empowering the community's economy, (5) cooperation with local governments and private institutions. This involvement strengthens the relationship between *pesantren* and the surrounding community and contributes to regional socio-economic development.

Discussion

In the context of developing Islamic boarding school-based educational institutions, strengthening a unique identity is an essential element that contributes to the sustainability and competitiveness of the institution. Strengthening this identity includes highlighting *pesantren's* characteristics, such as curriculum and teaching methods rooted in tradition, learning yellow books, and emphasizing character education. According to McGonigle and Mastrian (2024), organizations that successfully maintain their unique identity can create value that differentiates them from competitors and build closer relationships with the community. In the case of *pesantren*, this can be realized through instilling Islamic values and habituating the independence of students who reflect the typical character of *pesantren*. Strengthening this identity also creates consistency in the educational process, which ultimately helps *pesantren* achieve their goals effectively.

On the other hand, digital media also plays a crucial role in maintaining the relevance of *pesantren* in the modern era (Shidiq & Mubin, 2022). Technology can help *pesantren* improve the quality of education and operational efficiency and expand the reach of da'wah (Aidulsyah, 2023; Maemonah et al., 2023; Sørensen et al., 2023; Nasir et al., 2024). In line with Park's (2020) view, digital marketing enables educational institutions to be more effective in promoting superior programs and reaching a wider audience. Optimizing social media and websites is a relevant strategy for *pesantren* in disseminating educational content that can attract prospective students and build a positive image in society (Yulianita et al, 2022; Juhaidi, 2024).

The development of superior programs is one of the main strategies of *pesantren* to differentiate themselves from other Islamic educational institutions. Specially designed superior programs, such as the Al-Qur'an memorization program, the study of yellow books, and Arabic

and English language training, can strengthen the identity of *pesantren* and provide added value for students. According to research by Zurqoni et al. (2019), excellent programs based on the development of academic and non-academic skills, such as entrepreneurship, Islamic arts, and leadership training, can improve the abilities and competencies of students as a whole, preparing them to contribute in various fields—programs like this help students develop their skills and foster self-confidence and independence. These programs are crucial in enhancing students' overall competence, fostering self-confidence, and promoting independence, thus preparing them for diverse contributions in various fields (Ulya, 2018; Alvarez-Huerta et al., 2021; Maharani & Abidini, 2022).

In addition, da'wah, public speaking, and journalism training programs are essential in equipping students with effective communication and da'wah skills. According to Angulo-Ruiz (2016), educational institutions that can develop programs relevant to market needs are more successful in attracting prospective students and improving their institutional reputation. Therefore, *pesantren* with outstanding students and alums need to actively promote their achievements as part of branding efforts and improve the image of the *pesantren* in the eyes of the public. Thus, a well-structured flagship program not only strengthens the students' character but also increases the competitiveness of *pesantren* in facing the challenges of the modern education world.

Strategic partnerships are an essential element in the development of educational institutions, including *pesantren*. Establishing collaborations with other educational institutions and community or public figures can increase the capacity and expand the influence of *pesantren*. Austin and Seitanidi (2018) state that effective strategic partnerships require a structured process, from identifying common goals to implementing and evaluating agreed programs. With this partnership, *pesantren* can access additional resources, whether in the form of knowledge, technology, or networks, which can improve education quality and expand *da'wah's* scope.

Creating a strategic partnership includes seven key stages: identifying common goals, mapping potential, active communication, designing joint programs, formalizing cooperation, gradual implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Each stage is crucial in ensuring the partnership runs effectively and sustainably. For example, active communication between *pesantren* and partner institutions can overcome potential obstacles and build more vital trust. On the other hand, continuous evaluation of the partnership results helps ensure that the agreed goals can be achieved while allowing for adaptation to improve results. Thus, systematically built strategic cooperation can strengthen the position of *pesantren* in facing global education challenges and increase their contribution to the broader community.

Community involvement is one of the strategic approaches that can increase the role and influence of *pesantren* in the social and economic life of the surrounding community. Activities that directly involve the community, such as public religious studies, community service programs, and the provision of educational facilities, strengthen the social ties between *pesantren* and the surrounding community. It is in line with the view of Fulbright-Anderson et al. (2001), which emphasizes the importance of community involvement in supporting the sustainability of educational institutions through ongoing and collaborative interactions. *Pesantren* that actively involve the community in their programs can become educational institutions and agents of social development in their surrounding areas.

Furthermore, community economic empowerment programs run by *pesantren* play an essential role in encouraging local economic growth. According to research conducted by Huggins (2001), economic empowerment through skills training and cooperation with private or government institutions can help improve people's standard of living and reduce economic disparities in rural areas. In addition, partnerships between *pesantren*, local governments and private institutions provide access to additional resources and expand the reach of *pesantren* programs.

Thus, community involvement in *pesantren* activities strengthens social relations and contributes significantly to social and economic development at the local level.

CONCLUSION

Pesantren have an excellent opportunity to enhance its role as a competitive educational institution by strengthening its unique identity, utilizing digital media, developing superior programs, strategic partnerships, and community involvement. These strategies contribute to the sustainability and relevance of *pesantren* in the modern era. *Pesantren*, which can combine traditional values with digital innovation and external collaboration, have great potential to become educational and socio-economic development centres in their communities. For future research, it is recommended that further studies explore the specific impacts of community empowerment programs and the use of digital technology on improving the quality of education in *pesantren* and how these strategies can be replicated in different *pesantren* contexts.

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