Positioning Pesantren as Community-Based Educational Brands: A Case Study of Pesantren Nurul Ulum

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Abstract

Through a qualitative case study approach, this study examines Pesantren Nurul Ulum's positioning strategy as a community-based educational institution. The research focuses on how the pesantren builds its institutional identity not through formal promotion but through social involvement, collective narratives, and local values that live in the surrounding community. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis from pesantren managers, santri guardians, and community leaders. Data analysis was done thematically and confirmed through triangulation of techniques and data sources. The results showed that Pesantren Nurul Ulum successfully positioned itself as an institution that blends socially and spiritually with the community, with legitimacy built through participation, cultural symbols, and alumni's narratives. The *branding* strategy is organic and rooted in shared experiences, not merely institutional visualization or promotion. This finding strengthens the theoretical framework of *community-based branding*, which emphasizes the importance of sustainable social relationships in shaping institutional image. Pesantren faces serious challenges in managing digital communication, which is an important aspect in expanding its influence in the era of information technology. This research makes a theoretical contribution to the development of Islamic education branding discourse. It offers practical guidance for pesantren and similar institutions in building authentic, contextual, and socially relevant positioning strategies.
Keywords: pesantren, community-based branding, positioning, Islamic education.

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is an Islamic educational institution with deep historical, cultural, and spiritual roots in Indonesian society. The role of pesantren, originally focused on religious education, has now experienced a significant shift due to globalization, modernization, and competition among educational institutions. This transformation requires pesantren to maintain the authenticity of Islamic values and strengthen their institutional existence through communication strategies and identity management relevant to current social dynamics (Rofiki & Rohmah, 2025).

One of the main challenges is how pesantren can position themselves as educational institutions with uniqueness, credibility, and competitiveness amid various formal education options. However, many pesantren still have not systematically developed an institutional *positioning* strategy. Education marketing literature shows the importance of building a strong community-based institutional identity through authentic narratives and social engagement (Kotler & Gertner, 2010; Fullan, 2017).

In Islamic education, pesantren have unique social and cultural capital that can be developed as a *community-based educational brand*. Recent studies have shown that the *community-based branding* approach can strengthen public legitimacy and sustainability of educational institutions, especially those based on local values and traditions (Herawati & Mukhsin, 2025; Salim, Berlian, & Zainuri, 2024). Through this approach, pesantren become educational centers and social and cultural nodes that have identity appeal (Fitriani et al., 2024).

However, studies on pesantren branding practices are still dominated by conceptual studies or limited to aspects of economic empowerment (Isbah, 2016; Saputra et al., 2023) and digital transformation (Imroni, 2024). Not much research deeply examines the *positioning* and narrative of pesantren identity from the perspective of *marketing education* and *internal branding* based on community participation.

Some relevant studies, such as Hasanah & Irfany (2023), Wahid et al. (2024), and Yurista (2025), touched on the issues of pesantren branding from various aspects, such as edutourism, social entrepreneurship, and community, but have not yet developed a practical model that can be applied institutionally. Rozi and Poernamasari (2023) even noted the potential image of pesantren in the educational tourism ecosystem, but have not yet reached the internal aspects of branding and identity communication holistically.

Based on this gap, this study aims to explore the community-based institutional positioning strategy of Pesantren Nurul Ulum, focusing on how social narratives, public

communication, and local community involvement shape perceptions of pesantren identity. The novelty contribution of this study lies in the initial development of a narrative and visual model of *community-based educational branding* in the context of pesantren institutions, which has not been explicitly explained in the previous literature.

This research is expected to fill the void of studies in the marketing management of Islamic education and provide practical guidance for pesantren in strengthening their existence strategically, authentically, and adaptively to the times.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study type, which aims to deeply understand the *positioning* strategy of Pesantren Nurul Ulum as a community-based educational institution. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the meaning, strategies, and social dynamics in and around educational institutions, which cannot be explained through numbers or quantitative data alone. Case studies are relevant because the research focus is directed at one intensive case unit, namely, on the practices and institutional narratives of Pesantren Nurul Ulum, in the context of its community.

The researcher is the main instrument, directly involved in data collection and interpretation. Data collection techniques were conducted through in-depth interviews with pesantren caregivers, management team, community leaders, and santri guardians; participatory observation of institutional activities and social interactions that occur within the pesantren environment; and document analysis of publications, brochures, social media, and other communication artifacts used by pesantren in building public image. The data collection strategy was conducted in stages to enable a contextualized and reflective understanding of community-based *branding* practices.

The data analysis process was inductive and step-by-step, using a thematic approach to identify patterns, narratives, and representations of the field data. Data obtained through various techniques were brought together and verified through triangulation of sources and techniques to ensure the validity and credibility of findings. Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained openness to the field dynamics and built understanding through critical reflection and dialogue with the data. This research is not intended for generalization, but rather to enrich the understanding of how pesantren as educational institutions can position themselves strategically and authentically in their communities.

DISCUSSION

Social and Cultural Context of Pesantren Nurul Ulum

Pesantren Nurul Ulum stands in a semi-rural area where the community is still thick with traditional Islamic values and community-based social practices. Demographically, most santri guardians come from family backgrounds of farmers, small traders, and informal sector workers. In this context, the existence of pesantren is not only interpreted as a formal religious-based educational institution, but also as the central node in the community's social, spiritual, and cultural dynamics.

One of the prominent socio-cultural characteristics is the existence of religious groups such as *sholawatan*, *muslimatan*, mosque youth, and village youth communities that actively interact with pesantren activities. These activities become an important channel in forming mutual interactions between pesantren and the community, as well as the initial foundation of the practice of *community-based educational branding*.

In-depth interviews with pesantren caregivers revealed that the basic philosophy held by this institution is "being one with the community". This value manifests in various policies, such as community involvement in decision-making, collaboration in religious programs such as open recitation and celebration of Islamic holidays, and productive waqf programs managed with local residents. Field observations also show that the pesantren building is designed to be open without a high fence, symboling openness and social connectedness with the surrounding environment.

Community-based Positioning Strategy

Pesantren Nurul Ulum's *positioning* strategy was developed not through a conventional marketing approach, but through strengthening social narratives and integration in community practices. The institution's branding is formed through shared experiences, the value of togetherness, and the active role of residents in religious and educational activities. For example, the local *Muslimatan* group regularly holds recitations in the pesantren environment, while the youth community is involved in cleaning activities, Friday night recitation, and pesantren social media.

Pesantren uses a three-pillar approach in the community brand strategy:

1. Social presence in the community: Parent engagement programs, family consultations, Islamic parenting training, and open recitation activities targeting a cross-section of the community.

2. Visual and symbolic representation: Pesantren integrates local symbols such as village batik motifs and traditional architecture in promotional materials and social media. The visual identity is displayed consistently in banners, billboards, and digital publications.

3. Alumni narratives as brand ambassadors: Graduates play an important role in strengthening the image of the pesantren. They convey their experiences and impressions through digital channels, new santri guardian meetings, and public testimonials at community events.

Community Perception of Pesantren Image

Interviews with santri guardians and community leaders revealed that the image of pesantren is formed organically through emotional interactions and collective experiences. Phrases such as *"not only is my child learning, but we as parents are also being nurtured"* show that education in pesantren is understood holistically as a process of forming a pious family, not just religious academics.

This perception is reinforced by the fact that the community feels that they have a vast space for involvement in the life of pesantren, from physical development to contributions to social activities and da'wah. This shows that pesantren has succeeded in building a brand as an institution that lives in the community's collective consciousness, by the principle of *community-based educational brand* (Fullan, 2017).

Challenges and Opportunities in Brand Strengthening

Despite successfully establishing a strong social identity, the main challenge lies in the digitalization aspect of branding. Observation of the pesantren's official digital channels shows content production and identity visualization irregularities. Social media management has not been done professionally and still relies on volunteers or santri interested in the field.

The pesantren IT team recognizes that no specific institutional structure handles digital communication. However, the emergence of the involvement of young alumni and volunteers in creative content management is a strategic opportunity to expand the community's *positioning* into the digital space. If facilitated systematically, this potential can be the basis for developing *digital community-based educational branding* relevant to millennials and Gen-Z.

Community-Based Branding: From Social Roots to Institutional Identity

The findings of this study confirm that the practice of *community-based educational branding* in Pesantren Nurul Ulum is not formed through a top-down institutional promotion approach, but through social relations that are rooted in Islamic community activities such as *sholawatan*, *Muslimatan* groups, mosque youth, and other community activities. This shows that the brand of educational institutions in the context of pesantren is built from the *bottom up*, through emotional involvement, social participation, and the recurrence of interactions between pesantren and residents.

This finding strengthens Isbah's (2016) argument that pesantren are not only educational institutions, but also social actors with a cultural role in community development. In this framework, the pesantren brand is not an engineered image. However, a representation of *social embeddedness is closely related to* the value structure and social practices of the surrounding community (Sulaiman & Ahmadi, 2020).

Furthermore, the *community-based branding* structure as applied by Pesantren Nurul Ulum is by the *community brand* theory developed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), where the strength of a brand is not only determined by the products or services offered, but by the sense of connection and collective trust that the user community has towards the institution. In the context of Islamic education, the involvement of santri guardians, alums, and the local community becomes a *co-creator* of the meaning of the institution, as also shown by Andespa, Yeni, and Fernando (2024) in their study of Islamic branding in the context of Islamic financial institutions.

Another prominent finding is the *internal branding* strategy organically formed through alum activities as ambassadors of the institution's image. This expands the perspective of Imroni (2024), who stated that pesantren branding tends to be reactive and sporadic. This study proves otherwise, that alum narratives can be a strategic element in brand strengthening if managed systematically.

The unique contribution of this research is the development of the concept of narrative and visual *community-based educational branding* in the form of three pillars: (1) community social presence, (2) symbolism and visual identity, and (3) alumni narrative. This model extends the value-based branding approach developed by Hasanah & Irfany (2023), by providing a practical framework to be applied by community-based Islamic education institutions.

On the other hand, the findings on challenges in managing digital communication emphasize the importance of institutional adaptation to the digital era. This is relevant to the

findings of Imroni (2024), who mentioned that the imbalance in the digitalization of pesantren is often not due to ignorance, but because an adequate managerial structure has not been established. Therefore, the involvement of digital volunteers from among young alums can be a strategic *entry point* in building *digital-based community branding,* as Muchtar (2014) predicted in his research on pesantren media engagement.

This research makes several important contributions to the field of Islamic education marketing and community-based institutional management:

1. Theory Strengthening: This study strengthens the concept of *brand community* in the context of pesantren as an educational institution attached to the local socio-cultural network.

2. Practical Model Development: Produce a narrative and visual framework based on the three pillars of community-branding that similar organizations can replicate.

3. Integration of Social Literacy and Branding: Demonstrating how alumni narratives and local communities can become organic and sustainable instruments of institutional branding.

4. Digital Actualization Issues: Adding aspects of digitalization dynamics and structural challenges in social media management for community-based Islamic education institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that Pesantren Nurul Ulum has successfully positioned itself as a community-based educational institution through a participatory, contextual approach and is firmly rooted in local values. The positioning strategy is not built through a formal promotional approach, but through social narratives that grow from collective experiences and community involvement. The pesantren identity is reflected in social policies, architectural openness, and informal communication that blends with the community, confirming that the institutional brand lives in an active and authentic social space.

This finding strengthens the community-based branding theoretical framework, which states that the strength of the image of educational institutions, especially pesantren, lies in sustainable social relations and public narratives that are naturally shaped by community experiences. However, pesantren face serious challenges in managing digital communication, an important aspect in expanding the institution's influence in the era of technological

transformation. Visual disorganization and the absence of a communication management structure indicate the need for a more systematic and collaborative digital strategy.

In addition, this research expands the academic discussion on branding Islamic educational institutions by placing pesantren as social actors who manage education and community brands. The model developed by Pesantren Nurul Ulum can inspire other educational institutions to build strong, authentic, and relevant positioning in the face of social dynamics and challenges of the times.

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