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THE KIAI AS A COMMUNITY RELATIONS AGENT IN SUSTAINING THE EXISTENCE OF ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY AT PONDOK PESANTREN BURHANUL ABRAR BESUKI, SITUBONDO

Moh. Rifa'i*✉, Sholahuddin Sholahuddin**

*Universitas Nurul Jadid, Indonesia
E-mail: mohrifaiahmad@unuja.ac.id
**Universitas Nurul Jadid, Indonesia
E-mail: sholahuddin220104@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the role of the *kiai* (Islamic boarding school leader) as an agent of community relations (*hubungan masyarakat*) in sustaining the institutional existence of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar, Besuki, Situbondo, East Java, Indonesia. Situated within the framework of Islamic community development and institutional communication, the study analyzes the strategies, patterns, and social dynamics through which the *kiai* builds and maintains relationships with surrounding communities, alumni networks, government actors, and the broader public. A qualitative research design with a case study approach was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with pesantren administrators, student guardians (*wali santri*), alumni, and community figures selected through purposive sampling, complemented by participatory observation of da'wah activities, social services, and community interactions, as well as institutional documentation. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, with validity ensured through source, method, and time triangulation. The findings reveal that the *kiai* occupies a strategically central position in the pesantren's community relations system, functioning simultaneously as a charismatic leader, moral communicator, social capital builder, and cultural da'wah actor. The *kiai*'s community relations strategies encompass personal communication, cultural engagement through local Islamic traditions, moral exemplarity, external da'wah activities across multiple regions, and alumni network strengthening through the IKSABA organization. These strategies have yielded measurable outcomes, including a growth in student enrollment from 220 santri in 2023 to 255 in 2024 and 290 in 2025, reflecting increasing public trust and the deepening social legitimacy of the institution. The study concludes that the *kiai*'s role as a cultural public relations agent is the most

✉Corresponding author:
Email Address: mohrifaiahmad@unuja.ac.id
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dominant factor in sustaining the pesantren's existence, and contributes a replicable model of community-based Islamic institutional communication applicable to other pesantren in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords: Islamic Community Development; Kiai Leadership; Community Relations; Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren); Social Capital; Da'wah.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran kiai sebagai agen hubungan masyarakat dalam mempertahankan eksistensi kelembagaan Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar, Besuki, Situbondo, Jawa Timur. Bertolak dari kerangka pengembangan masyarakat Islam dan komunikasi kelembagaan, penelitian ini menganalisis strategi, pola, dan dinamika sosial yang digunakan kiai dalam membangun serta merawat hubungan dengan masyarakat sekitar, jaringan alumni, pemerintah, dan publik yang lebih luas. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan pengurus pesantren, wali santri, alumni, dan tokoh masyarakat yang dipilih secara purposive, dilengkapi dengan observasi partisipatif terhadap kegiatan dakwah, pelayanan sosial, dan interaksi komunitas, serta pengumpulan dokumentasi kelembagaan. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña yang mencakup kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan, dengan validitas yang diperkuat melalui triangulasi sumber, metode, dan waktu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kiai menempati posisi yang sangat strategis dalam sistem hubungan masyarakat pesantren, berfungsi sekaligus sebagai pemimpin karismatik, komunikator moral, pembangun modal sosial, dan aktor dakwah kultural. Strategi hubungan masyarakat kiai mencakup komunikasi personal, keterlibatan kultural melalui tradisi keislaman lokal, keteladanan moral, dakwah eksternal lintas wilayah, dan penguatan jaringan alumni melalui organisasi IKSABA. Strategi-strategi ini menghasilkan dampak yang terukur, antara lain peningkatan jumlah santri dari 220 pada tahun 2023 menjadi 255 pada tahun 2024 dan 290 pada tahun 2025, yang mencerminkan meningkatnya kepercayaan publik dan semakin kuatnya legitimasi sosial lembaga. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa peran kiai sebagai agen hubungan masyarakat kultural merupakan faktor paling dominan dalam mempertahankan eksistensi pesantren, dan menawarkan model komunikasi kelembagaan berbasis masyarakat yang dapat direplikasi oleh pesantren lain di Indonesia kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Pengembangan Masyarakat Islam; Kepemimpinan Kiai; Hubungan Masyarakat; Pondok Pesantren; Modal Sosial; Dakwah.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) occupy a position of enduring significance in Indonesian Islamic education, serving as institutions that shape the moral, social, and intellectual character of their students across generations. In a period of rapid social transformation, the sustainability and existence of the pesantren as an institution depends substantially on its capacity to cultivate harmonious and productive relationships with the surrounding community.[1] The pesantren does not sustain itself through internal educational excellence alone; its continuity is equally contingent on the active role of the *kiai* in building two-way communication, maintaining public trust, and strengthening institutional relationships with the community and alumni networks. This communicative function — which closely resembles the domain of community relations in organizational communication theory — is one of the most underexamined dimensions of pesantren leadership.[2] Understanding how the *kiai* performs this function, and how it contributes to institutional sustainability, is therefore a matter of significant academic and practical importance.

The concept of community relations (*hubungan masyarakat*/humas) in the pesantren context refers to the process of strategic communication between the institution and its external publics — including the surrounding community, government actors, and alumni networks. The primary objective of this relational process is to build cooperation, enhance public trust, and strengthen the institutional image of the pesantren.[3] Theoretically, public relations is understood as a planned effort to construct positive public perceptions through consistent, transparent, and sustained interaction. In the pesantren environment, the community relations function is not primarily discharged by a formal public relations department; rather, it is embodied and enacted through the figure of the *kiai*, whose personal charisma and social authority constitute the most powerful instrument of institutional communication.[4]

The *kiai* possesses strong social legitimacy rooted in the depth of Islamic scholarship, moral exemplarity, and sustained involvement in community life. The *kiai*'s role in building community relations is realized through da'wah activities, social dialogue, visits to diverse communities, the strengthening of alumni networks, and participation in communal religious activities.[5] At Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar Besuki, Situbondo, this role is clearly evidenced by the *kiai*'s da'wah activities across multiple regions over the past three years — including visits to Desa Patemon Jatibanteng, Patemon Bungatan, IKSABA Bali, and various other areas — demonstrating a sustained and expansive effort to extend the pesantren's social and religious network. The tangible impact of this engagement is reflected in the consistent growth in student enrollment: 220 *santri* in 2023, rising to 255 in 2024, and reaching 290 in 2025. This trajectory of growth signals increasing public trust in the *kiai* as a figure and affirms the effectiveness of the community relations approach he has

[1]Muhammad Khoirul Fatih, "Peran Pesantren dalam Penguatan Moderasi Beragama di Indonesia," *Alamtara: Jurnal Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam* 8, no. 2 (2024): 165–198.

[2]Ahmad Miftahul Amaly, Ahmad Syamsu Rizal, and Udin Supriadi, "The Existence Kiai of the Islamic Boarding School in the Community," *ATTARBIYAH: Journal of Islamic Culture and Education* 5, no. 1 (2020): 14–30. https://doi.org/10.18326/attarbiyah.v5i1.14-30

[3]Zaenal Imam Ghazali, "Urgensi Manajemen Humas dalam Membangun Citra Pondok Pesantren di Masyarakat," *Al-Abshar: Journal of Islamic Education Management* 3, no. 1 (2024): 17–33. https://doi.org/10.58223/al-abshar.v3i1.227

[4]Muhammad Fahim and Abdurrahman Abdurrahman, "Strategi Humas untuk Membangun Citra Pondok Pesantren," *Edukasiana: Jurnal Inovasi Pendidikan* 4, no. 2 (2025): 265–271. https://doi.org/10.56916/ejip.v4i2.1110

[5]Zaenal Imam Ghazali, "Urgensi Manajemen Humas dalam Membangun Citra Pondok Pesantren di Masyarakat," *Al-Abshar: Journal of Islamic Education Management* 3, no. 1 (2024): 17–33. https://doi.org/10.58223/al-abshar.v3i1.227

built. The significance of these data is what motivated the selection of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar Besuki, Situbondo as the research site: enrollment growth reflects the concrete success of the *kiai*'s da'wah strategy and social networking in strengthening the pesantren's institutional existence.[6]

The institutional existence of a pesantren is sustained when it enjoys the support, trust, and active engagement of the broader community. Sociologically, the pesantren is an institution that grows from within the community and functions in service of the community; harmonious public relationships are therefore the primary condition of its continuity.[7] The *kiai*'s role as a social communicator enables the pesantren to be accepted and trusted by the public. Participation in socio-religious activities, community service programs, and communal gatherings constitutes social capital that reinforces institutional presence and legitimacy. This becomes increasingly vital in the modern era, when pesantren are called to demonstrate not only religious excellence but also social responsiveness and institutional adaptability to the changing needs of the communities they serve.[8]

At Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar Besuki, Situbondo, the institution's existence is profoundly shaped by the *kiai*'s closeness with the community. The *kiai*'s relationships with community figures, religious congregations (*jamaah*), alumni, and local government actors have given the pesantren a strong and respected social position.[9] Evidence of this is seen in the increasing number of *santri*, the expansion of da'wah activities beyond the local region, and the growing level of public trust observed over the past three years.[10] These developments indicate that the community relations built by the *kiai* are not merely incidental communication, but constitute a cultural strategy for reinforcing the institutional sustainability of the pesantren in a competitive educational landscape.

Despite the substantial influence of community relations on pesantren development, in-depth academic research on how the *kiai* performs this role at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar Besuki, Situbondo specifically remains scarce. The *kiai*'s interactions with the community have historically been regarded as natural and spontaneous, and have therefore received limited systematic academic examination.[11] Yet in an era of modernization and competition among Islamic educational institutions, the community relations strategies employed by a pesantren play a decisive role in determining its long-term viability. Three core questions emerge from this gap: How does the *kiai* build relationships with the community? What strategies are employed? And what factors make the *kiai*'s role effective in sustaining the pesantren's institutional existence? It is this knowledge gap that constitutes the primary rationale for the present study.[12]

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[6]Ainun Harahap, Sri Rahayu, and Hotni Sari Harahap, "Eksistensi Pendidikan Pondok Pesantren untuk Masyarakat Labuhanbatu," *ALACRITY: Journal of Education* 4, no. 1 (2024): 59–67. https://doi.org/10.52121/alacrity.v4i1.227

[7]Ruslan and Maftuhah Imam, "Persepsi Masyarakat Terhadap Eksistensi Pesantren," *Kariman: Jurnal Pendidikan Keislaman* 10, no. 1 (2022): 137–152. https://doi.org/10.52185/kariman.v10i1.196

[8]Wahidul Umam, "Kepemimpinan Kiai dalam Mengembangkan Pondok Pesantren," *Attractive: Innovative Education Journal* 2, no. 3 (2020): 61. https://doi.org/10.51278/aj.v2i3.60

[9]Faris Salman Annabil and Muhammad Hanif, "Kyai's Leadership in Fostering Alumni Harmony and Solidarity through the Halaqah Approach in Islamic Boarding Schools," *Journal of Islamic Education Research* 6, no. 3 (2025): 315–330. https://doi.org/10.35719/jier.v6i3.504

[10]Hadi Ismanto, "Komunikasi Politik Kyai dalam Pengembangan Pesantren: Studi Analisis Terhadap Pondok Pesantren Sunan Drajat Lamongan," *JOSH: Journal of Sharia* 2, no. 2 (2023): 101–109. https://doi.org/10.55352/josh.v2i2.542

[11]Sarmaida Lubis, "Manajemen Hubungan Masyarakat dalam Pengembangan Pondok Pesantren Jauharoh Al-Mannan Kecamatan Panyabungan Selatan," *MATAAZIR: Jurnal Administrasi dan Manajemen Pendidikan* 3, no. 1 (2022): 285–291. https://doi.org/10.56874/jamp.v3i1.782

[12]Moh. Samsul Bahri, "Framing Interpersonal Kyai dalam Peningkatan Reputasi Pondok Pesantren Nurul Qadim," *Aafiyah: Jurnal Multidisiplin Ilmu* 1, no. 2 (2023): 112–127. https://doi.org/10.70610/ja.v1i02.174

Previous research confirms that the *kiai* exerts considerable influence over pesantren development, particularly in the domains of social communication and public acceptance. However, most existing studies examine community relations in general terms, without closely analyzing the concrete practices through which the *kiai* enacts external da'wah, social collaboration, and alumni network-building.[13] At Pesantren Burhanul Abrar Besuki, Situbondo, the unique phenomenon of intensive da'wah engagement across diverse regions, sustained alumni network development through IKSABA, and a measurable improvement in institutional reputation over three consecutive years has not been subjected to comprehensive academic study. The present study therefore offers novelty in the form of an in-depth analysis of the *kiai* as a cultural public relations agent in the context of the contemporary Indonesian pesantren.[14]

This study aims to provide a comprehensive description of the *kiai*'s role in building community relations at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar. It also seeks to identify the strategies and social communication approaches employed by the *kiai*, to analyze how these relational practices sustain and strengthen the pesantren's institutional existence, and to identify the enabling and constraining factors that shape the effectiveness of community relations in this context.

The study holds significance both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches the scholarship on pesantren public relations by positioning the *kiai* as a social communicator whose charismatic authority directly influences institutional sustainability — demonstrating that pesantren community relations is not merely structural but also deeply cultural and personal.[15] Practically, the findings can serve as a reference for pesantren leaders in formulating community relations strategies grounded in personal authority, alumni networks, and external da'wah activities. For Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar specifically, this study provides evidence-based insights into the factors that strengthen public trust, which can inform future institutional development policies.[16] In an era characterized by intensifying competition among Islamic educational institutions, the findings of this study affirm the enduring relevance of *kiai*-centered relational leadership as a model of sustainable Islamic community development.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach. The qualitative method was selected because it is best suited to capturing the depth, complexity, and contextual nuances of socio-religious phenomena — particularly those involving the role of the *kiai* in building community relations as a strategy for sustaining the institutional existence of the pesantren.[17] Unlike quantitative approaches that seek measurable generalizations, the qualitative method enables the researcher to understand the meanings, processes, and social dynamics underlying the *kiai*'s relational practices as they occur naturally within the pesantren environment. The case study design was employed because this study focuses on a single institution — Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar Besuki,

[13]Nur Khamid, "Kiai Communication's Contribution to Enhancing Organisational Effectiveness," *Business and Applied Management Journal* 2, no. 1 (2024): 48–59. https://doi.org/10.61987/bamj.v2i1.491

[14]Slamet Wakit, Zaharuddin M., Dasep Supriatna, and Margiono Suyitno, "The Promotional Management of Salaf Islamic Boarding Schools in Increasing Animo of New Students," *Halaqa: Islamic Education Journal* 7, no. 2 (2023): 105–123. https://doi.org/10.21070/halaqa.v7i2.1657

[15]Agus Wahyudin, Ahmad Rohman, and Umi Fauziah, "Implementation of Public Relations Management Development at Boarding Schools in the Smart Society 5.0 Era," *AL-WIJDĀN: Journal of Islamic Education Studies* 8, no. 2 (2023): 197–212. https://doi.org/10.58788/alwijdn.v8i2.2416

[16]Ahmad Ainul Yaqin M.S. and Reza Fahlifi, "Strategi Humas Pondok Pesantren Al-Qodiri dalam Mempertahankan Citra Pesantren," *Medio Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 1, no. 1 (2023): 33–48. https://doi.org/10.56013/mji.v1i1.1776

[17]Lexy J. Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, Edisi Revisi (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2017).

Situbondo — and seeks to understand it as a bounded social system with unique contextual characteristics, institutional dynamics, and patterns of community engagement that cannot be adequately captured through broader comparative designs.[18] The case study approach is therefore particularly appropriate for generating rich, contextually grounded knowledge about how the *kiai* as the central figure enacts community relations through da'wah activities, social service, interpersonal communication, and alumni network management.

The study was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar, located in Besuki, Situbondo Regency, East Java Province, Indonesia. This site was selected for two primary reasons. First, it is one of the few pesantren in the Besuki area that has demonstrated consistent growth in student enrollment over three consecutive years — from 220 *santri* in 2023, to 255 in 2024, and 290 in 2025 — a trajectory that provides a concrete empirical basis for investigating the relationship between the *kiai*'s community relations activities and institutional sustainability. Second, the *kiai* of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar has been observed to conduct intensive da'wah activities across multiple regions, including Desa Patemon Jatibanteng, Patemon Bungatan, and the IKSABA network in Bali, making this site a particularly information-rich context for analyzing the community relations strategies of a *kiai* in a contemporary pesantren setting.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that involves the deliberate identification and selection of individuals based on their direct knowledge, experience, and involvement in the phenomenon under investigation.[19] The informants in this study comprised four groups: (1) pesantren administrators (*pengurus pesantren*), who possess direct knowledge of the institution's organizational strategies and community relations programs; (2) student guardians (*wali santri*), who represent the broader community's perspective on the *kiai*'s influence and the pesantren's public image; (3) alumni of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar, who are able to speak to both their own experiences under the *kiai*'s leadership and their ongoing role as ambassadors of the pesantren in the wider community; and (4) community figures (*tokoh masyarakat*), who are positioned to assess the *kiai*'s role as a social communicator and the pesantren's standing within the local socio-religious landscape. The selection of informants from these four groups ensures multi-stakeholder representation and enables the researcher to construct a comprehensive and multi-perspectival account of the *kiai*'s community relations role.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with all four informant groups using a semi-structured interview guide developed in accordance with the research objectives. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to cover key thematic areas while remaining responsive to the specific experiences and perspectives of each informant. Participatory observation was conducted directly at pesantren activities including da'wah events, social service programs, community gatherings, and routine interactions between the *kiai* and community members, enabling the researcher to observe the *kiai*'s communicative practices and relational strategies as they naturally unfolded. Documentation was collected from institutional records relating to pesantren development over the past three years, including enrollment data, event documentation, correspondence with community stakeholders, and materials related to the IKSABA alumni network. These three data sources function in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner, providing a comprehensive empirical foundation for the study's findings.[20]

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[18]Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

[19]John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014).

[20]Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*, (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2019).

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of three iterative stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.[21] In the data condensation stage, the researcher systematically reviewed, selected, and focused the raw data — including interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials — identifying the information most directly relevant to the research questions. In the data display stage, the condensed data were organized into descriptive narrative form, thematic matrices, and conceptual summaries to facilitate the recognition of patterns, relationships, and recurring themes. In the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher formulated preliminary interpretations and continuously verified them against the full data corpus throughout the analysis process, ensuring that the conclusions drawn were firmly grounded in empirical evidence rather than prior assumption.

To ensure the credibility, transferability, and scientific accountability of the findings, this study employed three forms of triangulation.[22] Source triangulation was applied by comparing and cross-referencing information obtained from the four different informant groups — pesantren administrators, student guardians, alumni, and community figures — to identify areas of convergence and divergence in their perspectives. Method triangulation was employed by comparing the findings derived from in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary analysis to assess the internal consistency of the data across collection methods. Time triangulation was applied by collecting data at multiple points across the study period, enabling the researcher to identify the stability or variation of patterns over time and to account for temporal changes in the *kiai*'s community relations activities. Together, these triangulation strategies ensure that the findings of this study reflect the empirical reality of the phenomenon under investigation in a comprehensive, rigorous, and academically defensible manner.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Role of the *Kiai* in Building Pesantren Community Relations

The findings reveal that the *kiai* occupies a strategically central position in building and sustaining community relations at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar. This role extends far beyond formal institutional leadership; it encompasses cultural, ethical, and symbolic dimensions that are deeply embedded in the person of the *kiai* as a social and moral figure. This finding is consistent with Weber's concept of charismatic authority, which holds that religious leaders derive their legitimacy not from organizational structure alone, but from social recognition of their moral qualities, spiritual depth, and consistency of character and conduct.[23] In this sense, the *kiai*'s authority is simultaneously religious and social — generating a form of institutional legitimacy that no administrative structure can replicate.

Within the framework of community relations, the *kiai* functions as a *key opinion leader* with considerable capacity to shape public perceptions, cultivate trust, and build sustained community loyalty toward the pesantren. This is consistent with the *relationship management theory* of public relations developed by Ledingham and Bruning, which holds that the effectiveness of community relations is determined by the quality of long-term

[21]Mil Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, dan Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, edisi ke-3 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014).

[22]Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002).

[23]Muhammad Abdullah and Kusaeri Kusaeri, "Cultural Transformation of Kiai Leadership in Madura: From Religious Educators to Political Leaders," *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 16, no. 2 (2024). https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i2.5333

relationships grounded in trust, commitment, openness, and mutual satisfaction.[24] The *kiai*'s practices — including sustained *silaturahmi* (interpersonal visits), active participation in community socio-religious activities, and direct responsiveness to social concerns — constitute a concrete application of this theoretical framework within the pesantren context.

The study further finds that the *kiai*'s communication pattern tends to be interpersonal and dialogic in character. This aligns with DeVito's humanistic theory of interpersonal communication, which emphasizes the centrality of empathy, emotional closeness, and openness in building sustainable social relationships. The *kiai* does not position himself as a distant authority figure; rather, he presents himself as someone who listens, understands, and engages directly with the community. This approach contributes significantly to strengthening public trust — which, according to Putnam's social capital theory, is the key element in the formation of robust and sustainable social networks.[25]

From the perspective of Bourdieu's symbolic capital, the *kiai* possesses high symbolic authority within the community. This symbolic capital is used constructively to build the pesantren's image as a religiously grounded, open, and socially engaged institution. The *kiai*'s involvement in community religious activities, cross-regional da'wah, and social problem-solving further reinforces the pesantren's social legitimacy. The relationship thus built between the pesantren and the community is not transactional but is grounded in values of trust and moral commitment.[26]

The *kiai*'s role in maintaining social harmony also resonates with the concept of *values-based leadership*, which emphasizes that effective leadership rests on the leader's capacity to internalize and embody moral values in their daily practice. The values of sincerity (*ikhlas*), moral exemplarity, and social responsibility demonstrated by the *kiai* constitute the primary foundation for building harmonious relations between the pesantren and the community. This finding affirms that in the context of religious educational institutions, a moral and cultural approach to community relations is more effective than a purely administrative one — and that *kiai* leadership, grounded in charisma and the capacity to cultivate relationships with community figures, village governments, and other educational institutions, positions the pesantren as a central point of reference for socio-religious affairs.[27]

Strategically, the community relations developed by the *kiai* have a direct bearing on the pesantren's capacity to sustain and strengthen its institutional existence. From the perspective of institutional legitimacy theory, the sustainability of an institution is profoundly shaped by the degree of acceptance and trust it receives from its surrounding community. The *kiai*'s success in building harmonious community relations causes the pesantren to be understood not merely as an educational institution but as a moral and

[24]Lailatul Happyana, Fatimah Zahro Istiqomah, Miftakhul Khasanah, and Mohd Hussin, "Integration of Tradition and Technology: Digitalization Strategies in Islamic Education at Pesantren in Banyuwangi, Indonesia," *Journal of Islamic Education Research* 6, no. 1 (2025): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.35719/jier.v6i1.446

[25]Annisa Hastrida and Hendriyani, "Pengaruh Komunikasi Dialogis Terhadap Kepercayaan Pada Pemerintah," *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi dan Media* 27, no. 2 (2023): 141–160. https://doi.org/10.17933/jskm.2023.5144

[26]Muhammad Falikul Isbah, "Pesantren in the Changing Indonesian Context: History and Current Developments," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 65–106. https://doi.org/10.21043/QIJIS.V8I1.5629

[27]Muhammad Burhanudin and Muhammad Syamsul Falah, "Kepemimpinan Kiai dalam Peningkatan Kualitas Pendidikan di Pondok Pesantren Hudaya Diwek Jombang," *Southeast Asian Journal of Islamic Education Management* 6, no. 1 (2025): 75–92. https://doi.org/10.21154/sajiem.v6i1.510

social center of gravity. This condition strengthens the pesantren's position in the face of increasingly complex social change.[28]

In sum, the findings demonstrate that the *kiai*'s role in building community relations exhibits strong alignment with multiple theories from social science, communication studies, and leadership scholarship. The *kiai* emerges as a key actor who successfully integrates charismatic leadership, interpersonal communication, social capital, and moral values into the practice of pesantren community relations — and this integration constitutes the primary factor in sustaining and strengthening the institutional existence of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar.

B. Social Communication Strategies Employed by the *Kiai*

The communication strategies employed by the *kiai* have proven effective because they are designed in alignment with the cultural character and social needs of the surrounding community. From the standpoint of contextual communication theory, the success of message delivery depends substantially on the coherence between message content, the communicator's identity, and the socio-cultural context of the audience. A communication approach grounded in an understanding of local context allows the messages conveyed by the *kiai* to be received not as impositions but as natural extensions of everyday community social life.[29]

First, personal communication realized through direct encounters, informal dialogue, and face-to-face interaction builds emotional closeness between the *kiai* and the community. This pattern is consistent with DeVito's humanistic interpersonal communication theory, which emphasizes empathy, openness, and relational warmth as the basis for sustainable social relationships. Through personal communication, *psychological closeness* is cultivated, making community members feel valued and trusted. Within the framework of *relationship management theory*, relationships built through interpersonal communication are assessed as stronger and more enduring than those relying solely on formal procedures or institutional approaches.[30]

Second, cultural communication that draws on local religious practices and traditions — including *tahlilan*, *yasinan*, and *kenduri* gatherings — functions as a social space in which the *kiai* and the community meet as equals. This is consistent with communication accommodation theory, which emphasizes the importance of adjusting communication style and medium to the values, norms, and practices of the audience. Local religious traditions serve as *cultural frames* that facilitate the internalization of religious messages within an atmosphere of familial warmth and community solidarity. From the perspective of cultural da'wah, this approach is considered more effective than normative-formal preaching, as the message is conveyed through symbols and practices that already carry established social meaning for the community.[31]

Third, communication through moral exemplarity positions the *kiai*'s behavior as a nonverbal message with high persuasive power. The *kiai*'s simple lifestyle, social empathy,

[28]Fajar Ardiansyah, Fifi Agustin, and Rifqi Muhtadi, "Digitalisasi Filantropi Islam Pada Pesantren Di Pulau Madura," *IQTISADIE: Journal of Islamic Banking and Shariah Economy* 1, no. 2 (2021): 225–255. https://doi.org/10.36781/iqtisadie.v1i2.172

[29]Ahmad Munjin Khoirul Amrullah and Zainul Fanani, "Model Komunikasi di Lembaga Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Indonesia* 3, no. 2 (2019): 334–346. https://doi.org/10.35316/jpii.v3i2.138

[30]Muhammad Oki Laksana and Nurhaliza Nurhaliza, "The Impact of Communication Ethics on the Communication Quality in Interpersonal Relationships," *Eduvest: Journal of Universal Studies* 3, no. 5 (2023): 989–995. https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v3i5.815

[31]Ahmad Gozali and Rizky Novriandi, "Shalawat Dulang Sebagai Media Dakwah Kultural Di Nagari Saruaso Kab. Tanah Datar," *Al-Jamahiria: Jurnal Komunikasi dan Dakwah Islam* 2, no. 2 (2024): 162–173. https://doi.org/10.30983/al-jamahiria.v2i2.8865

and moral consistency represent pesantren values in lived, concrete form. In nonverbal communication theory, actions and conduct are often regarded as more credible than verbal messages — particularly in contexts of moral leadership. This finding also resonates with the concept of transformational leadership, particularly the dimension of *idealized influence*, wherein the leader becomes a source of inspiration through exemplary conduct. The *kiai*'s exemplarity functions as a value symbol that simultaneously reinforces the pesantren's image and elevates public trust in the institution.[32]

Fourth, communication through external da'wah activities — conducted in Desa Patemon Jatibanteng, Patemon Bungatan, and the IKSABA network in Bali — reflects a strategy for expanding the pesantren's social network. From the perspective of social network theory, the influence of an institution grows in proportion to the breadth of the relational network it builds on the basis of trust and shared values. Cross-regional da'wah serves not only as a vehicle for religious dissemination but also as a medium for building the pesantren's social reputation. These activities strengthen the pesantren's legitimacy across a wider social space and contribute directly to the reinforcement of its institutional existence.[33]

Taken together, these four communication strategies demonstrate that the pesantren's social relations are built not through modern instrumental marketing approaches, but through cultural and spiritual mechanisms oriented toward value. From the perspective of social capital and symbolic capital theory, approaches that emphasize values and moral exemplarity are more effective in building long-term community loyalty — and this loyalty constitutes the strategic foundation sustaining the pesantren's continued existence amid ongoing social change.

C. Community Relations as the Foundation of Pesantren Institutional Existence

The findings demonstrate that the relationships built by the *kiai* with the community are not merely social and religious in character but carry strategic significance for the pesantren's sustainability and institutional existence. These relationships function as primary capital for maintaining public trust, expanding social legitimacy, and deepening community support for the pesantren. One particularly salient empirical indicator of the effectiveness of these relationships is the consistent year-on-year growth in student enrollment, which reflects high levels of public acceptance and trust. This finding is consistent with institutional legitimacy theory, which affirms that the sustainability of an institution depends substantially on the social recognition and acceptance it receives from its environment.[34]

1. Trust-Based Relations as the Foundation of Pesantren Existence

The community trust cultivated through sustained interaction with the *kiai* is the key element in preserving the pesantren's existence. From the perspective of Putnam's social capital theory, trust (*trust*) is the fundamental component that enables long-term cooperation between the institution and the community. This trust encourages the community to continue entrusting their children's education to the pesantren, to provide

[32]Khoirunnisaa' and Binti Maunah, "Karakteristik Kepemimpinan Transformasional di Lembaga Pendidikan Islam Tradisional dan Modern," *MANAGERE: Indonesian Journal of Educational Management* 3, no. 2 (2021): 31–42. https://doi.org/10.52627/ijeam.v3i2.124

[33]Dwi Harnadi, Hotman Siahaan, and Masdar Hilmy, "Pesantren and the Preservation of Traditional Religious Authority in the Digital Age," *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan dan Politik* 34, no. 3 (2021): 272–280. https://doi.org/10.20473/mkp.v34i32021.272-280

[34]Siti Ghaibah Mukri and Gilang Ramadan Adiputra Putra, "Legalitas Pesantren Sebagai Lembaga Pendidikan Keagamaan Masyarakat Indonesia," *Adalah* 6, no. 5 (2022): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.15408/adalah.v6i5.27007

moral and material support, and to maintain the pesantren's positive reputation amid changing social dynamics. Trust-based relationships also enable the pesantren to function as a catalyst for social development — extending its role beyond internal institutional boundaries into the broader life of the nation and state.[35]

2. Moral and Cultural Legitimacy as Reinforcement of Pesantren Image

The *kiai*'s role as a moral figure generates significant cultural legitimacy for the pesantren. Within Bourdieu's symbolic capital framework, the moral authority possessed by the *kiai* functions as a symbol of trust that is indirectly attached to the institution he leads. As a result, the pesantren is understood not merely as a formal educational institution but as a living representation of religious and moral values embedded in community life.[36]

3. Social Support as a Pillar of Pesantren Sustainability

The harmonious relationship between the *kiai* and the community generates sustained social support for the pesantren. From the perspective of *stakeholder theory*, the community is positioned as the primary stakeholder whose engagement has a direct bearing on the pesantren's sustainability. This support is expressed not only through participation in pesantren activities but also in the form of social protection when the pesantren faces external challenges, pressures, or criticism.[37]

4. Participatory Relations as a Strategy for Developing Institutional Existence

The study finds that the relational patterns constructed by the *kiai* are participatory and dialogic in nature, fostering a sense of communal ownership (*sense of belonging*) among community members. Within *relationship management theory*, high-quality relationships are characterized by commitment, active involvement, and mutual belonging between the institution and its publics. When community members are engaged in pesantren activities, the pesantren's existence is not merely maintained but collectively developed.[38]

5. Social Reproduction and Long-Term Pesantren Sustainability

The relationship between the *kiai* and the community also functions as a mechanism of social reproduction for the pesantren. From an institutional theory perspective, pesantren values, traditions, and practices are reproduced through continuously occurring social interaction. The sustainability of the pesantren is maintained not only through organizational structure but also transmitted culturally through cross-generational trust and community support.[39]

D. Enabling Factors in Community Relations Effectiveness

The study identifies five key enabling factors that strengthen the pesantren's community relations.

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[35]Khusnul Hamidah and Ahmad Chasannudin, "Mechanization of Islamic Moderation Da'wah in the Nahdlatul Ulama Pesantren Tradition," *Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah* 41, no. 1 (2021): 15–29. https://doi.org/10.21580/jid.v41.1.7134

[36]Sri Rahayuningsih, Agus Setiawan, Andi Warisno, Agung Ananda Andari, and Moh. Aly Anshori, "The Importance of Kyai Charismatic Leadership in the Formation of Akhlakul Karimah," *JMKSP: Jurnal Manajemen, Kepemimpinan, dan Supervisi Pendidikan* 8, no. 2 (2023): 461–471. https://doi.org/10.31851/jmksp.v8i2.11227

[37]Syamsun Ni'am and Nurul Nafi'ah Arafah, "Transformasi Sistem Pendidikan Formal Pesantren," *DIMAR: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 6, no. 1 (2024): 69–84. https://doi.org/10.58577/dimar.v6i1.271

[38]Heny Endang Trisnantari, Moh. Gufron, and Putri Retno Ningsih, "Strategic Public Relations to Build Public Trust in Islamic Boarding Schools: A Case Study in Indonesia," *Tarbawi: Jurnal Keilmuan Manajemen Pendidikan* 10, no. 2 (2024): 325–336. https://doi.org/10.32678/tarbawi.v10i02.11541

[39]Dwi Harnadi, Hotman Siahaan, and Masdar Hilmy, *op. cit.*

1. First, the *kiai*'s communicative and open character. The *kiai*'s accessibility and capacity to engage with all social strata allow strong social relationships to be built organically. Community members across different backgrounds feel welcomed and heard, which deepens their emotional attachment to the pesantren.
2. Second, deeply rooted pesantren tradition. The religious traditions practiced by the pesantren align closely with local community culture, making the pesantren easily accepted as an integral part of community social life. This cultural consonance reduces institutional distance and strengthens the pesantren's social embeddedness.
3. Third, sustained da'wah activities. The *kiai*'s da'wah mobility across diverse regions continuously expands the pesantren's social network of associates, loyal supporters, and community admirers, generating an ever-widening circle of institutional goodwill.
4. Fourth, the active role of alumni. Alumni serve as important mediators who extend the pesantren's social reach, connecting the institution with new communities and creating robust social networks that independently promote the pesantren's reputation.
5. Fifth, strong local community support. The community's sense of pride in having the pesantren within their midst motivates them to provide support in the form of resources, social participation, and endorsement — and to position the pesantren as a center for their own religious activities.

These enabling factors are mutually reinforcing, creating a cumulative dynamic in which the quality of community relations deepens over time.

E. Inhibiting Factors in Community Relations

Alongside the enabling factors, the study also identifies five significant inhibiting factors.

1. First, the *kiai*'s heavy workload. Because community relations depend so substantially on the personal involvement of the *kiai*, many pesantren public relations activities cannot function optimally when the *kiai*'s schedule is demanding or his presence elsewhere is required.
2. Second, the absence of a formal community relations structure. The pesantren does not yet possess a dedicated division or team responsible for managing public relations activities in a planned and systematic manner. As a result, community relations programs are not consistently documented and lack institutional systematization.
3. Third, limited use of modern communication media. The pesantren remains underutilizing social media and digital communication technologies to extend the reach of its community relations in the digital era — a gap that limits its capacity to engage younger and more digitally connected publics.
4. Fourth, competition from other educational institutions. The emergence of new educational institutions with modern facilities and aggressive marketing strategies sometimes leads community members to compare the pesantren unfavorably with formal schools, creating reputational pressure.
5. Fifth, rapidly changing social dynamics. Shifts in community lifestyles, economic needs, and educational preferences require the pesantren to continuously adapt its communication strategies to new and evolving social patterns — a demand that outpaces the pesantren's current organizational capacity.

These inhibiting factors collectively indicate that the pesantren needs to innovate and institutionalize its community relations approach in order to remain relevant and competitive amid accelerating social change.

F. Analysis

The analysis of the research findings confirms that the *kiai*'s role in community relations at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar is not merely normative-religious in character but is strategically significant in sustaining the pesantren's institutional existence. The findings confirm that the *kiai* holds a central position as a charismatic figure who constitutes the primary source of moral and social legitimacy for the community.[40] This reinforces Weber's *charismatic authority* theory, which holds that traditional religious leadership often rests on moral reputation and spiritual perception. In the pesantren context, this charisma does not merely generate spiritual deference; it also creates a *trust space* that facilitates the pesantren's relational engagement with diverse community constituencies.[41]

The *kiai*'s intensive da'wah activities across multiple regions demonstrate that pesantren community relations are organic in character — not engineered through modern educational marketing approaches but cultivated through emotional closeness, social engagement, and consistent moral exemplarity.[42] This is consistent with the concept of *community-based relations*, in which social relationships are built through personal proximity, participatory social involvement, and sustained role-modeling.[43] In the specific context of Burhanul Abrar, the da'wah activities conducted in Desa Patemon Jatibanteng, Patemon Bungatan, and through the IKSABA Bali network demonstrate that pesantren community relations expand organically through the *kiai*'s social mobility as a moral agent — producing a natural expansion of the pesantren's social network marked by growing public admiration, sustained alumni loyalty, and increasing community trust in the quality of pesantren education.

The *kiai*'s public communication function extends well beyond preaching. He simultaneously serves as a social mediator, family counselor, and symbol of reconciliation in conflict resolution. His capacity to communicate effectively across diverse social groups demonstrates that pesantren leadership is dialogic and adaptive — built on consultation (*musyawarah*), empathy, and spiritual equality rather than top-down authority. This communication pattern reinforces the pesantren's image as an inclusive institution, generating strong emotional proximity between the community and the institution.

From the perspective of religious institutional public relations, the *kiai*'s role shapes the pesantren's *institutional image* through three primary mechanisms: presence, social service, and moral exemplarity.[44] The *kiai*'s presence at community activities builds the

[40]Ahmad Karim, Hadi Purnomo, Fitriyah Fikriyah, and Eny Nur Kardiyati, "A Charismatic Relationship: How a Kyai's Charismatic Leadership and Society's Compliance are Constructed?" *Journal of Indonesian Economy and Business* 35, no. 2 (2020): 129–143. https://doi.org/10.22146/jieb.54705

[41]Titi Sartini, "Kyai as Moral Authority: Negotiating Religious Discipline and Cultural Identity in Pesantren," *Managere: Indonesian Journal of Educational Management* 7, no. 1 (2025): 70–81. https://doi.org/10.52627/managere.v7i1.756

[42]Galih Fuad Shodikin, Ahmad Fawaid, and Lukman Sholeh, "An Analysis of Kyai's Charisma and Leadership in the Marketing of Islamic Boarding School Institutions," *Edukatif: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 5, no. 1 (2023): 642–650. https://doi.org/10.31004/edukatif.v5i1.4629

[43]Miftakhul Rohman and Laela Lutfiana Rachmah, "Kontribusi Tokoh Agama Sebagai Figur Teladan dalam Pendidikan Karakter di Lingkungan Sekolah," *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 4, no. 1 (2025): 145–156. https://doi.org/10.58222/jurip.v4i1.1272

[44]Muhammad Busyairi Khofi and Muhammad Furqon, "Strategi Kepemimpinan Kiai dalam Mengembangkan Pondok Pesantren," *INCARE: International Journal of Educational Resources* 5, no. 3 (2024): 265–288. https://doi.org/10.59689/incare.v5i3.1019

perception that the pesantren belongs to the community rather than standing apart as an exclusive entity. Social services — including charitable distributions, religious guidance, and conflict mediation — demonstrate the pesantren's function as a guardian of social harmony. Moral exemplarity reinforces the pesantren's reputation as an institution that consistently embodies the values of Islamic ethics. These three mechanisms generate a layered legitimacy that sustains the pesantren's existence over the long term.

The alumni network constitutes an additional dimension of significant analytical importance. Alumni function as social extensions of the pesantren, disseminating values, expanding networks, and building positive institutional reputation in their respective communities.[45] This function is consistent with Putnam's *social capital* theory, which holds that strong social networks increase institutional cohesion and sustainability through reciprocal trust. Alumni of Burhanul Abrar who are actively engaged in da'wah, education, and social activities across diverse regions generate sustained positive perceptions of the pesantren.

Overall, this study demonstrates that pesantren institutional existence is not determined solely by internal educational management capacity but is equally sustained by the *kiai*'s external capacity to build broad, deep, and enduring community relations. The social relationships generated are not merely administrative but are grounded in religious values, social ethics, and emotional proximity. This is precisely what distinguishes the pesantren from general educational institutions: the pesantren's sustainability is more fundamentally determined by the quality of its social relationships than by any modern management strategy. The primary strength of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar resides in the figure of the *kiai* as the central actor of community relations — encompassing spiritual, social, communicative, and representative dimensions that simultaneously construct robust social capital for the institution.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the institutional existence of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Abrar Besuki, Situbondo is fundamentally sustained by the *kiai*'s capacity to build and maintain deep, value-based community relations. The *kiai* occupies the most central and strategically dominant position in the pesantren's community relations system — functioning simultaneously as a charismatic leader, moral communicator, social capital builder, and cultural da'wah actor. His relational practices, encompassing personal communication, cultural engagement through local Islamic traditions, moral exemplarity, and cross-regional da'wah activities, are not the product of a formal public relations strategy but of an organic, value-driven approach to community engagement rooted in Islamic ethics and cultural proximity. The tangible outcomes of this approach are reflected in the consistent growth of student enrollment from 220 *santri* in 2023 to 255 in 2024 and 290 in 2025 — a trajectory that provides concrete empirical evidence of deepening public trust and expanding social legitimacy.

The study further establishes that the *kiai*'s community relations model generates institutional sustainability through five interconnected mechanisms: trust-based relations that motivate the community to continuously entrust their children's education to the pesantren; moral and cultural legitimacy that positions the pesantren as a living embodiment of Islamic values; sustained social support from community stakeholders; participatory and dialogic relational patterns that cultivate a sense of communal ownership over the pesantren; and the social reproduction of pesantren values through the alumni

[45]Habeeb Rahuman, Sithy Aisha, dan Norzaidi Mahadi, "Strategic Alumni Engagement in Business Schools: A Role and Social Capital Perspective," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 15, no. 8 (2025), https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v15-i8/26163

network, particularly through the IKSABA organization. Together, these mechanisms affirm that the pesantren's existence is *kiai*-centric in structure — meaning that its sustainability rests primarily on the *kiai*'s personal integrity, social capacity, and sustained engagement with diverse community constituencies. This distinguishes the pesantren from general educational institutions, whose sustainability is more commonly determined by organizational management and competitive marketing rather than by the quality of social relationships.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the scholarship on Islamic community development and pesantren institutional communication by demonstrating that the *kiai* constitutes a unique type of community relations actor whose authority and communicative effectiveness are simultaneously grounded in Islamic scholarship, moral exemplarity, and culturally embedded relational practice. This model enriches the literature on Islamic community development by offering empirical evidence of how traditional religious leadership functions as a durable and self-sustaining mechanism of social capital formation and institutional legitimacy — one that operates through cultural and spiritual logic rather than through modern institutional communication frameworks.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are offered. For pesantren administrators and leaders, the *kiai*'s relational practices should be recognized as a core institutional asset and progressively formalized within a planned community relations strategy — preserving the cultural authenticity of the *kiai*-centered approach while building structural mechanisms that ensure continuity beyond individual leadership. Greater utilization of digital communication platforms and social media is also recommended to extend the pesantren's community reach in the contemporary era. For Islamic education policymakers, pesantren development policies should give adequate attention to social relational and cultural legitimacy dimensions alongside structural and curricular concerns. For future researchers, comparative and mixed-methods studies involving multiple pesantren contexts and quantifiable indicators — such as enrollment growth, public trust indices, and alumni engagement rates — are recommended to generate more generalizable insights into the relationship between *kiai*-centered community relations and pesantren institutional sustainability across diverse regional and social settings in Indonesia.

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