



Visual Storytelling Strategy in Digital Content to Increase Islamic Boarding School Brand Trust

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Abstract:

This study examines the role of visual storytelling strategies in digital content to enhance brand trust in Islamic boarding schools. This study addresses the gap between the theoretical potential of storytelling and its limited practical implementation in Islamic boarding school digital communications. Using a qualitative case study approach at Walisongo Islamic Boarding School in Pontianak, data was collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving key informants such as school leaders, public relations officers, and parents. The findings indicate that visual storytelling is built through authentic representations of students' daily activities, religious values, and institutional identity, presented in simple yet meaningful visual formats. This study highlights that authenticity, consistency, and value-based narratives are more influential in building public trust than complex visual aesthetics. Furthermore, digital branding strategies tend to be implicit, relying on real-life storytelling rather than direct promotion. Audience interactions demonstrate positive engagement, reflecting the effectiveness of storytelling in fostering emotional connections and trust. This study concludes that optimizing visual storytelling can significantly strengthen Islamic boarding school brand trust, provided it balances authenticity with adaptive digital innovation in a competitive media environment.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed how organizations communicate, construct institutional identities, and establish relationships with the public. The central issue is that digital communication has become an essential factor in determining institutional credibility and long-term sustainability. This transformation is particularly significant in the educational sector because prospective students, parents, and communities increasingly rely on digital information, social media, and online interactions when evaluating educational institutions. Consequently, educational organizations must develop communication strategies capable of representing institutional values in authentic and meaningful ways. Previous studies demonstrate that digital branding and social media engagement significantly contribute to strengthening institutional identity, expanding public recognition, and enhancing stakeholder participation (Asmendri et al., 2024; Rachman et al., 2025; Masuwd et al., 2025). Therefore, strengthening digital communication is no longer merely a technological adaptation but a strategic necessity for educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), to maintain public trust and remain relevant within an increasingly digital society.

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) possess distinctive educational characteristics rooted in Islamic values, moral development, and community traditions, making them unique educational institutions within contemporary society. Nevertheless, the primary

challenge currently faced by many pesantren is not the quality of their educational programs but their limited ability to communicate these distinctive characteristics effectively through digital platforms. Public perceptions are increasingly shaped by online content, visual representations, and digital interactions rather than direct institutional experiences. Consequently, institutions that fail to communicate their identity strategically risk receiving limited public recognition despite their educational excellence. In many cases, digital communication remains focused on disseminating institutional information instead of creating meaningful narratives capable of strengthening emotional relationships with audiences. This situation highlights the importance of developing communication approaches that authentically represent institutional identity while simultaneously building credibility, engagement, and sustainable public trust in the increasingly competitive educational environment.

The current phenomenon indicates that many pesantren have actively adopted digital platforms such as institutional websites, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media to expand public communication. However, much of the published content still emphasizes routine announcements, ceremonial activities, or administrative information without presenting compelling stories that communicate institutional philosophy, student experiences, Islamic values, and community contributions. Consequently, digital communication often generates limited emotional engagement and fails to strengthen meaningful relationships with prospective students, parents, alumni, and broader communities. Previous studies also reveal that although Islamic educational institutions have increasingly implemented digital marketing and social media strategies, they continue to face challenges related to branding consistency, strategic communication planning, digital literacy, and professional content management (Saepurohman et al., 2025; Suparjo et al., 2024; Annas & Inayah, 2025; Zakiah et al., 2025). These field realities demonstrate the growing need for communication approaches that integrate institutional identity with meaningful digital narratives.

Previous studies have extensively examined digital branding, marketing communication, and social media utilization within educational institutions. Research by Chotimah and Akrom (2024) and Cut et al. (2024) demonstrates that digital marketing strategies positively influence institutional image, public engagement, and organizational reputation. Similarly, studies conducted by Dong et al. (2023) and Richter et al. (2025) indicate that storytelling-based communication enhances audience engagement because authentic narratives create stronger emotional connections than conventional promotional approaches. These findings collectively confirm the strategic importance of digital communication in strengthening institutional competitiveness. However, existing literature generally focuses on digital marketing adoption, branding implementation, or social media management without specifically investigating how visual storytelling functions as a strategic mechanism for building brand trust within Islamic boarding schools. Consequently, the communicative role of visual narratives in representing pesantren identity remains insufficiently explored from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Further examination of previous literature reveals another important limitation regarding the integration of visual storytelling with Islamic educational values. Existing research on visual storytelling predominantly investigates commercial brands, tourism, creative industries, and consumer marketing contexts rather than religious-based educational institutions possessing distinctive cultural and spiritual characteristics (Campos et al., 2023; Wu & Lai, 2025; Nikulina et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies discussing digital transformation in pesantren mainly emphasize technology adoption, digital literacy, branding implementation, or organizational modernization without comprehensively analyzing how narrative structures communicate institutional authenticity and cultivate public trust (Alindra et al., 2025; Fauzi et al., 2025; Syarief et al., 2026). As a result, there

remains limited conceptual understanding of how visual storytelling can integrate visual representation, emotional engagement, institutional philosophy, and Islamic educational values into a coherent communication strategy. Addressing this research gap is essential because pesantren require branding approaches capable of preserving their identity while effectively responding to contemporary digital communication demands.

This study offers a novel conceptual perspective by positioning visual storytelling as the core strategic mechanism for strengthening brand trust within Islamic boarding schools. Rather than treating digital content merely as promotional material, this study conceptualizes visual storytelling as a process through which institutional meaning, educational philosophy, Islamic values, and authentic experiences are communicated to society. The proposed framework integrates narrative authenticity, emotional engagement, visual communication, and institutional identity into a comprehensive branding approach specifically designed for pesantren. This perspective emphasizes that sustainable public trust emerges from consistent representation of institutional values through meaningful visual narratives rather than from communication frequency alone. Consequently, the study provides a contextual branding framework that enables Islamic boarding schools to strengthen competitiveness, preserve cultural authenticity, and respond effectively to digital transformation without compromising their religious identity.

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to examine how visual storytelling strategies implemented through digital communication contribute to strengthening brand trust within Islamic boarding schools. Specifically, the research investigates how visual narratives represent institutional identity, explores the strategic factors influencing effective storytelling practices, and analyzes how authentic digital communication shapes public perceptions and trust. This study argues that brand trust is strengthened when meaningful narratives, attractive visual elements, authentic institutional experiences, and Islamic educational values are communicated consistently through digital platforms. Public trust is therefore understood as the outcome of continuous interaction between institutional authenticity and effective strategic communication rather than merely the result of promotional exposure. Accordingly, this research contributes by proposing an integrated conceptual framework that supports Islamic boarding schools in developing sustainable digital branding strategies capable of strengthening institutional credibility, stakeholder engagement, and long-term public trust within the contemporary educational landscape.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore the role of visual storytelling strategies in building brand trust within an Islamic boarding school context. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to investigate social phenomena through contextual understanding, participants' experiences, and interpretation of meanings embedded within communication practices (Lim, 2024; Cernasev & Axon, 2023). The case study design was considered appropriate because this research focuses on examining a specific phenomenon within a particular institutional setting, namely how digital content production and visual narratives are developed and perceived by audiences in an Islamic boarding school. Through this design, the study seeks to understand not only the characteristics of digital content but also the meanings, values, and communication processes underlying visual storytelling practices in strengthening institutional trust.

The research was conducted at Walisongo Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren Walisongo) in Pontianak. This location was purposively selected because the institution actively utilizes digital platforms as a medium for communicating educational activities, promoting institutional identity, and developing public relationships. The research focused on digital content produced by the pesantren, particularly social media posts, activity

documentation videos, and other promotional materials containing visual storytelling elements. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to examine digital communication patterns, content characteristics, and audience interactions. Interviews were conducted with selected informants, including the head of the Islamic boarding school, public relations personnel, and students' parents, as they represent both the producers and recipients of institutional communication messages. Documentation was used to collect digital archives, photographs, videos, and other relevant materials supporting the research analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model consisting of data condensation, data display, and data verification. This analytical process was selected because qualitative studies require systematic interpretation to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships within collected data (Cernasev & Axon, 2023). During the data condensation stage, information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents was selected, categorized, and simplified according to the research objectives, particularly aspects related to visual storytelling and brand trust formation. The condensed data were then displayed through descriptive narratives and thematic categories to facilitate interpretation of communication patterns and institutional strategies. The final stage involved data verification, where conclusions were continuously reviewed by comparing findings from different sources and techniques to ensure credibility. This analytical procedure enabled the study to generate comprehensive insights into how visual storytelling practices contribute to strengthening the digital image and public trust of Islamic boarding schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Concept of Visual Storytelling in Digital Communication

The concept of visual storytelling in digital communication at Walisongo Islamic Boarding School in Pontianak is operationally understood as the practice of conveying messages through a combination of visual elements (photos, videos, graphic design) and narratives that reflect the school's values. In practice, visual storytelling is not only interpreted as aesthetic content, but also as a representation of the students' lives, religious activities, and institutional identity, packaged narratively on social media. The content produced tends to depict the students' daily activities, religious moments, and social interactions in simple yet meaningful visual forms. This demonstrates that storytelling is built from everyday reality, not merely visual engineering. Thus, the concept of visual storytelling at this Islamic boarding school emphasizes aspects of authenticity, value, and emotional closeness with the audience, compared to a commercial approach oriented solely on aesthetics.

Interview results indicate that visual storytelling is seen as a strategy for building closeness with the public. The Public Relations Manager stated that "this content was created so that various Islamic boarding school activities can be accessed by the general public who are curious about the activities carried out by the Islamic boarding school." Meanwhile, the head of the Islamic boarding school said that "the stories uploaded on the Islamic boarding school's social media are various student activities and information about the Islamic boarding school." Based on this statement, the researcher interpreted that storytelling is understood as a tool for building authenticity and transparency. The narrative conveyed is not only intended to attract attention, but also build trust through real experiences. This is in line with the finding that storytelling based on real experiences can strengthen trust because the audience feels emotionally connected to the content presented.

Based on observations, the digital content of Walisongo Islamic Boarding School in Pontianak is dominated by visuals depicting student activities such as studying, worship, and social activities, presented in photos and short videos. The narratives accompanying the content tend to be simple, using communicative and religious language, and emphasizing the values of togetherness and spirituality. Furthermore, audience interaction is evident through positive comments, support, and questions that demonstrate interest in Islamic boarding school life. Researchers interpret this pattern as indicating an effort to build two-way communication through humanistic storytelling. Visual storytelling at this Islamic boarding school focuses on presenting the realities of students' lives visually and narratively to build emotional closeness and public trust. Content that is authentic, simple, and based on real experiences tends to be more effective in creating engagement and strengthening brand trust than content that is purely formal and informative.

Characteristic of Islamic Boarding School Digital Content

The content produced tends to be oriented toward educational and religious values, as well as representations of the lives of Islamic boarding school students. Content uploaded to social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube is dominated by the students' daily activities, religious activities, and documentation of Islamic boarding school events. The content uses photos and short videos with simple editing, without complex visual effects. The narrative accompanying the content is informative and persuasive, using religious language that is easily understood by the general public. Furthermore, there is consistency in the use of themes such as togetherness, discipline, and spirituality. This demonstrates that Islamic boarding school digital content serves not only as an information medium but also as a means of preaching and building a positive image of the institution in the digital space.

Table 1. characteristics of digital content

Content Aspects	Key Findings	Visual Form	The Meaning Conveyed
Them	Santri Activities (Formal, Non-Formal and Ubudiyah Education)	Photos and Videos	Religious values and discipline
Visual Style	Simple	Minimal Editing	Original
Narrative	Informative and Persuasive	Caption	Education and Preaching
Audience Interaction	Positive Comments and Active Response	Like and Comment	Trust and attraction

The table 1 shows that Islamic boarding school digital content has a relatively consistent structure and focuses on conveying values. Simple visuals reinforce the impression of realism and authenticity. The accompanying narrative also clarifies the message intended for the audience.

Based on the researcher's interpretation, the characteristics of the Walisongo Islamic Boarding School's digital content in Pontianak emphasize authenticity, simplicity, and religious values as key strengths in digital communication. The content is not oriented towards complex modern aesthetics, but rather focuses on the candid representation of the reality of Islamic boarding school life. This Islamic boarding school digital content serves as a medium for representing the lives of students, packaged visually and narratively, to convey educational and spiritual values to the public. This approach demonstrates that the Islamic boarding school prioritizes honesty over excessive visual appeal. It also demonstrates an awareness that public trust can be built through transparency and consistent messaging delivered repeatedly in digital content.

The dominance of content based on real-life activities indicates that the Islamic boarding school relies on reality as its primary source of storytelling. The use of simple visuals indicates both technical limitations and a strategy for maintaining authenticity. A narrative consistent with religious values strengthens the institution's identity. Positive audience interaction indicates that this content pattern is effective in building engagement and trust. Thus, it can be concluded that the characteristics of Islamic boarding school digital content form a distinctive communication pattern, namely simple, authentic, valuable, and consistent, which indirectly contributes to the formation of brand trust among the digital community.

Islamic Boarding School Branding Strategy in the Digital Era

Based on documentation of the digital activities of Walisongo Islamic Boarding School in Pontianak, the branding strategy implemented demonstrates a value-based branding approach, utilizing social media as the primary communication channel. Published content consistently displays the Islamic boarding school's identity through visuals of religious activities, education, and the lives of its students. Branding is not explicitly implemented through direct promotion, but rather is constructed through everyday narratives that reflect the institution's character. The use of platforms such as Instagram and YouTube demonstrates an adaptation to digital technology developments, as the Islamic boarding school seeks to reach a wider audience, including the younger generation and the general public. Furthermore, there is a relatively consistent pattern of logo use, visual colors, and language style as part of its brand identity. This indicates that the Islamic boarding school's branding strategy tends to be implicit, based on real-life experiences, and prioritizes trust through the representation of authentic activities in the digital space.

Table 2. Islamic Boarding School Digital Branding Strategy

Branding Elements	Implementation Method	Media Used	Branding Goals
Visual Identity	Logo, Colors, and Feed Appearance	Instagram and Youtube	Branding Consistency
Creative Content	Student Activities and Islamic Boarding Schools	Videos and captions	Building emotional connection
Religious Values	Ubudiyah Activities and Devotion	Photo and Videos	Creating a positive image
Posting Consistency	Regular Uploads	Social Media	Increasing brand awareness
Audience Interaction	Comment Replies	Digital Platforms	Building relationships and trust

Table 2 shows that branding strategy lies not only in visuals, but also in narrative and consistent communication delivered continuously through digital media. The Islamic boarding school branding strategy emphasizes a soft branding approach that focuses on values and experiences, rather than commercial promotions. Branding is built through consistent, real-life representations, creating an authentic perception in the eyes of the audience. This Islamic boarding school branding is carried out through the repeated delivery of digital content that showcases the institution's identity, values, and activities to build a positive image and public trust. This approach demonstrates that the Islamic boarding school does not directly "sell" the brand, but rather builds meaning through the visual experience and narrative presented. This also indicates that public trust is formed through message consistency and the alignment between the content and the reality presented.

The Islamic boarding school branding strategy in the digital era has several key trends. First, branding is carried out indirectly through content based on real activities, rather than formal advertising. Second, there is consistency in the use of visual elements and narratives that strengthen the institution's identity. Third, religious values are the core of every published content, distinguishing the Islamic boarding school from other

institutions. Fourth, interaction with the audience demonstrates the effectiveness of this strategy in building sustainable relationships. Thus, the branding strategy that is formed is a combination of authenticity, consistency, and values, which collectively contribute to building brand trust for Islamic boarding schools in the digital space.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that visual storytelling practices in Islamic boarding schools are primarily constructed through authenticity, religious values, and representations of students' daily experiences. The digital content produced by the *pesantren* does not merely function as promotional material but becomes a medium for communicating institutional identity and educational values. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that digital branding in Islamic educational institutions requires consistency between institutional values and digital representations (Aini et al., 2025; Cahyanto et al., 2025). However, unlike conventional branding approaches that prioritize attractive promotional visuals, this study demonstrates that authenticity becomes the dominant factor influencing public trust. Simple visual presentations reflecting real educational activities are perceived as more credible because they represent actual institutional practices. Therefore, this research contributes by highlighting authenticity-based visual storytelling as a distinctive branding mechanism within the *pesantren* context.

The findings further indicate that visual storytelling contributes to strengthening brand trust by creating emotional connections between Islamic boarding schools and their audiences. The narratives presented through digital platforms allow audiences to understand the institution beyond formal information, providing insights into educational processes, student activities, and religious values. This finding is consistent with research showing that storytelling-based communication can enhance audience engagement and strengthen brand relationships through meaningful narratives (Kaur et al., 2024; Richter et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this study extends previous understanding by demonstrating that storytelling effectiveness in *pesantren* is not primarily determined by commercial appeal but by the ability to communicate spiritual authenticity. The implication is that Islamic educational institutions should develop storytelling strategies that emphasize emotional relevance and cultural identity. This research contributes a contextual perspective on how storytelling principles can be adapted within religious educational environments.

The results also demonstrate that value-based branding plays an essential role in transforming digital content into a trust-building mechanism. Visual storytelling that displays students' experiences, learning processes, and religious activities creates transparency and strengthens institutional credibility. This finding corresponds with previous studies highlighting that Islamic educational branding depends on the ability to communicate distinctive values and institutional identities consistently through digital platforms (Munawwaroh & Rahayu, 2024; Rachman et al., 2025; Bayu et al., 2025). However, this study provides a new interpretation by showing that value representation itself becomes a strategic asset rather than merely an additional communication element. The causal relationship identified in this research suggests that stronger alignment between institutional values and digital narratives generates greater public confidence. Therefore, this study contributes by proposing value consistency as a fundamental dimension of visual storytelling-based branding in Islamic boarding schools.

This research also reveals that digital storytelling practices in Islamic boarding schools involve patterns of public relations communication, particularly through audience interaction and engagement. The findings show that responses, comments, and digital interactions provide indicators of how audiences interpret and respond to institutional narratives. This supports previous studies emphasizing that social media management and

digital public relations are important instruments for developing institutional reputation and public trust (Hani et al., 2024; Munawaroh & Habsi, 2025). However, the findings indicate that interaction within pesantren digital platforms remains relatively limited and is often focused on information dissemination rather than strategic dialogue. This condition suggests that Islamic boarding schools need to move beyond one-way communication by developing more participatory digital engagement. The contribution of this study lies in identifying the need to integrate storytelling strategies with interactive public relations approaches.

The findings highlight that the effectiveness of visual storytelling in Islamic boarding schools depends on the balance between maintaining authenticity and adopting digital innovation. While audiences appreciate genuine representations of pesantren life, younger digital users increasingly expect creative, dynamic, and visually engaging content. This finding supports research emphasizing the importance of digital media innovation and creative communication strategies in improving educational institution competitiveness (Alindra et al., 2025; Saepurohman et al., 2025; Aimah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this study differs from previous perspectives that primarily emphasize technological adoption by demonstrating that innovation must remain connected to institutional identity. The novelty of this finding is the identification of a balanced storytelling model in which technological creativity supports, rather than replaces, authentic pesantren narratives. Thus, this research contributes practical guidance for Islamic boarding schools seeking sustainable digital branding strategies.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to expanding discussions on digital branding by positioning visual storytelling as a bridge between institutional identity and public trust formation. Previous research has extensively examined digital marketing, social media utilization, and branding strategies in Islamic educational institutions, but limited attention has been given to how narrative construction influences trust development (Chotimah & Akrom, 2024; Cut et al., 2024). The present study fills this gap by demonstrating that visual storytelling operates through three interconnected dimensions: authenticity, value representation, and audience engagement. These dimensions explain how traditional educational institutions can maintain cultural identity while adapting to digital communication environments. Therefore, the contribution of this research is the development of a contextual understanding of digital branding in pesantren, where trust emerges from meaningful narratives rather than solely from promotional visibility.

Finally, this study emphasizes that visual storytelling represents a strategic pathway for Islamic boarding schools to strengthen their position in an increasingly competitive digital environment. The findings demonstrate that effective digital communication requires integration between authentic narratives, religious values, visual creativity, and interactive engagement. This perspective complements previous studies on digital transformation in pesantren, which mainly focus on technology adoption and digital literacy development (Fauzi et al., 2025; Maulana et al., 2025). The main contribution of this research is the proposition that digital transformation in Islamic educational institutions should prioritize meaning construction rather than merely technological implementation. Practically, pesantren can utilize these findings to design communication strategies that enhance public trust while preserving institutional identity. Therefore, visual storytelling can be understood as not only a branding tool but also a strategic approach for sustaining the reputation and legitimacy of Islamic boarding schools in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that visual storytelling in the digital content of Walisongo Islamic Boarding School demonstrates that public trust is primarily constructed through authenticity, consistency, and the meaningful representation of Islamic values rather than through sophisticated visual production or promotional intensity. The main lesson derived from this research is that effective digital branding requires alignment between institutional identity, communicated narratives, and actual educational practices, as audiences tend to trust content that reflects genuine experiences and values. From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes to the advancement of digital branding and educational communication literature by introducing a contextual understanding of how visual storytelling functions as a trust-building mechanism within Islamic boarding schools, an area that remains relatively underexplored. However, this study is limited by its focus on a single pesantren context, a qualitative design, and restricted observation of digital platforms and audience responses. Future research should examine multiple Islamic boarding schools with diverse cultural backgrounds, apply longitudinal approaches, and integrate mixed-method designs to provide broader insights into sustainable digital storytelling and institutional trust development.

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