



Silent Reputation Builders: How Pesantren Alumni Intellectual Networks Shape Institutional Legitimacy Through Value-Based Stewardship

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Abstract:

This study explores the strategic role of the Alumni Intellectual Network in building the institutional reputation of the pesantren through an informal value-based mechanism. Departing from the literature gap in the study of pesantren public relations which is still descriptive and structural, this study aims to develop a conceptual model of Stewardship-Based Public Relations (SBPR). With an interpretive qualitative approach and a critical single case study design, data was collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation of one pesantren with an influential alumni history. The thematic analysis identified three main themes: (1) Informal reputation communication mechanisms carried out by alumni as gatekeepers and reputation defenders; (2) Manifestation of alumni stewardship in the form of emotional commitment, moral obligation, and resource contribution; and (3) Adaptive challenges of public relations in managing informal networks that have symbolic authority. The findings expand on the theories of Stewardship and Relational PR by emphasising the importance of moral affiliation and organic communication in religious contexts. The proposed SBPR model positions alumni as strategic partners in institutional legitimacy, rather than merely as public relations objects. Managerial implications indicate the need to shift the paradigm of pesantren public relations from an administrative approach to a value-based, sustainable relationship model.

Key Words: *Alumni Network, Stewardship, Relational Public Relations, Islamic Boarding School, Institutional Reputation*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi peran strategis Jejaring Intelektual Alumni dalam membangun reputasi kelembagaan pesantren melalui mekanisme berbasis nilai informal. Berangkat dari kesenjangan literatur dalam kajian kehumasan pesantren yang masih deskriptif dan struktural, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengembangkan model konseptual Stewardship-Based Public Relations (SBPR). Dengan pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif dan desain studi kasus tunggal yang kritis, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, analisis dokumen, dan observasi partisipatif satu pesantren dengan sejarah alumni yang berpengaruh. Analisis tematik mengidentifikasi tiga tema utama: (1) Mekanisme komunikasi reputasi informal yang dilakukan oleh alumni sebagai penjaga gerbang dan pembela reputasi; (2) Wujud penatalayanan alumni berupa komitmen emosional, kewajiban moral, dan kontribusi sumber daya; dan (3) Tantangan adaptif humas dalam mengelola jejaring informal yang memiliki otoritas simbolis. Temuan ini memperluas teori Stewardship dan PR Relasional dengan menekankan pentingnya afiliasi moral dan komunikasi organik dalam konteks agama.

Model SBPR yang diusulkan menempatkan alumni sebagai mitra strategis dalam legitimasi kelembagaan, bukan hanya objek kehumasan. Implikasi manajerial menunjukkan perlunya mengubah paradigma kehumasan pesantren dari pendekatan administratif menjadi model hubungan berbasis nilai dan keberlanjutan.

Kata Kunci: *Alumni Network, Stewardship, Relational Public Relations, Islamic Boarding School, Institutional Reputation*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are known as value-based educational institutions that not only convey religious knowledge, but also shape the social, moral, and spiritual identity of the younger generation (Hayward & Pearce, 2021; Ross & Rouse, 2022; Zaid et al., 2022). In the context of globalisation and increasing demands for public accountability for educational institutions, Islamic boarding schools are facing new dynamics related to transparency, quality of academic services, and institutional attractiveness (Buanaputra et al., 2022; Fatmawati et al., 2023; Shaikh & Alam Kazmi, 2022). In this context, reputation becomes a non-material strategic asset that determines the legitimacy and sustainability of pesantren in social and professional spheres. It is therefore essential to understand how such reputations are built and maintained, primarily through non-structural actors such as alumni, whose roles often occur informally but have a significant impact on the institution's image.

The literature on Islamic educational institutions confirms that alumni networks play a strategic role in sustaining reputation, funding, and long-term relationships with stakeholders. Previous studies on universities have shown that effective relationships with alumni can result in forms of financial and non-financial support such as professional representation, public advocacy, and internal commitment (Albaroudi et al., 2025; de Villiers et al., 2025; Renick et al., 2025). Within the framework of stewardship theory, alumni are seen as actors who have a sense of moral responsibility to their alma mater, not just individuals who provide support based on transactional incentives (Maulana et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2020; Politis et al., 2024). Alumni as strategic assets that bring social networks, reputational legitimacy, and symbolic support to the institution (Saharani & Diana, 2024; Islamiah & Maulidiah, 2024; Purwanto & Wafa, 2023). However, most research still focuses on formal aspects such as donations, relationships with alumni offices, or loyalty levels to modern universities. The role of alumni as stewards of reputation in the context of religious education, especially Islamic boarding schools, is still rarely researched.

The gap opens up new research space. The literature on Islamic boarding schools has tended to focus on curriculum, religious traditions, or moral education practices. Research that discusses alumni as strategic actors in pesantren public relations is still very limited, especially related to value-based contributions, intellectual networks, and the dynamics of informal relations. Therefore, this research offers an academic contribution by adapting the theory of stewardship and relational public relations to the context of pesantren,

bridging secular higher education literature with Islamic education. This research also places alumni not just as financial donors, but as reputation stewards who work through long-term relationships, spiritual values, and social capital. The conceptual model offered, namely Stewardship-Based PR for Islamic Boarding Schools, takes into account cultural dynamics, religious values, and intellectual alumni networks.

The purpose of this research is to explore how alumni intellectual networks contribute to the formation and maintenance of pesantren reputation through value-based informal communication mechanisms. Specifically, this study focus to: (1) describe how alumni intellectual networks informally form and maintain a positive image of pesantren through informal public relations practices; (2) identify and analyze the stewardship mechanism manifested by influential alumni and how the Islamic boarding school Public Relations manages and responds to these values in the context of institutional relations; and (3) formulate a conceptual model of the relationship between Public Relations and alumni networks as reputation stewards that can be the basis for the development of value-based public relations strategies in the pesantren environment. Thus, this research contributes to the development of theories as well as reputation management practices in the context of community-based Islamic education.

The focus of the research is directed at the intellectual network of alumni as mediators of institutional reputation. The main argument is that the reputation of pesantren is not only influenced by formal aspects such as curriculum and institutional policies, but also by relationships, value commitments, and alumni contributions that take place informally and on a long-term basis. This research explores how alumni use professional status, social networks, and moral commitment to support the reputation of pesantren in the public sphere, media, and professional environment.

This research has both academic and practical value. Academically, this research expands the literature on public relations, stewardship, and alumni relations in the context of pesantren – a domain rich in value but rarely touched on in strategic PR discussions. Practically, the findings of the research can help pesantren leaders manage alumni as strategic partners and reputation stewards, not just a source of donations. The conceptual model developed can be applied by Islamic boarding schools or community-based institutions to build a public relations system based on relationships and values, relevant in the era of digitalization and reputational competition.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a case study design, with a focus on the Miftahul Ulum Lumajang Islamic Boarding School which has a strong history in producing influential intellectual alumni in various public sectors (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2023; Vaila & Ilango, 2024). This design was chosen because it is able

to provide an in-depth understanding of specific contexts that are rich in information, which not only reflects common phenomena, but also gives rise to the relational complexity between educational institutions and alumni in reputation-building practices. The type of research used is qualitative, because this research aims to explore holistically the phenomenon of alumni networks in building the image of the institution (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Morgan, 2022; Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022).

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews, document analysis (public relations policies, media news, alumni activity reports), and participatory observation limited to alumni events. The researcher acts as the main instrument and observer of the participant to capture cultural and relational meaning. The subjects of the research were determined through purposive and snowball sampling, covering three main categories: (1) Core Management of Islamic Boarding Schools (Caregivers, Public Relations, Foundation Chairs), (2) Influential Alumni (academics, politicians, scholars), and (3) External Parties (media observers, observers of Islamic education). The research was carried out at the Miftahul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Lumajang, lasting for four months (June-September 2025). The validity of the data is ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and theories, checking members (*member checking*), and trail audits by external experts (Cian, 2021; McGill et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2021). The research informants were compiled using the contribution format as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informant

Informant	Interview Code	Data Contribution	Relevance to Research Focus
Headmaster	PP	Narrative of institutional values and challenges of Public Relations	Strategic management of institutions and relations with alumni
Alumni	AAk	Practice of contributing expertise and motivation of alumni	Forms of stewardship and emotional values of alumni
Public Relations Vice	kh	Alumni response to the media crisis	The role of alumni as reputation defenders
Media Mass	ME	Independent analysis and public data	External perspectives on the effectiveness of alumni communication

The data was analyzed using an interactive model from Miles and Huberman, which consisted of three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion/verification (Briand et al., 2023; Hotaman, 2025; Salazar-Granizo et al., 2024). The process begins with reducing data through selection, simplification, and transformation of interview results into meaningful information. Then the data is presented in the form of a matrix, thematic narrative, and table of findings to make it easier to identify patterns. The final

stage is the drawing of conclusions through the interpretation and triangulation of data to form a coherent theoretical understanding. This technique was chosen because it provides a systematic structure in managing complex qualitative data. This analysis not only presents a description, but builds an in-depth theoretical interpretation of the role of alumni networks as stewards of pesantren reputation. Thus, the data collected and analyzed not only answer the formulation of the problem, but also form the conceptual basis for the proposed Stewardship-Based PR model.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of this research are formed in three main themes that are interrelated. These three themes provide a comprehensive overview of how the Alumni Intellectual Network plays a role in building the reputation of the Islamic boarding school. These themes include informal mechanisms that run outside of formal organizational structures, the expression of stewardship values as a form of trust-based leadership, and how PR management adjusts strategies when dealing with alumni networks that have a strong influence on the legitimacy of the institution.

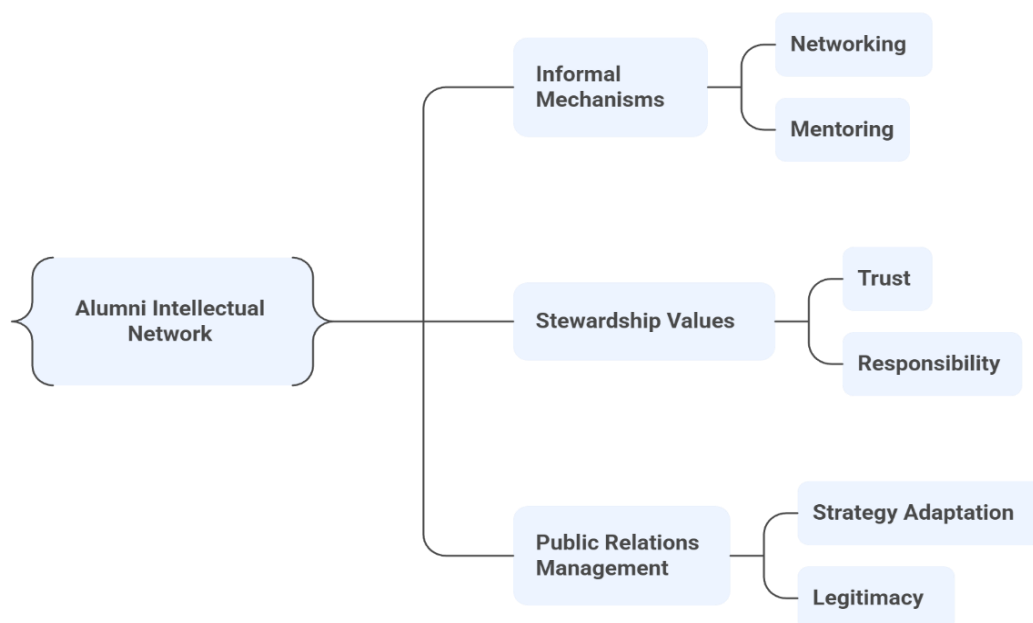


Figure 1. Role of the Alumni Intellectual Network in Strengthening Pesantren Reputation

Alumni Intellectual Network Mechanism

The Alumni Intellectual Network Mechanism refers to the informal, unstructured, and morality-based communication process used by influential alumni to build, maintain, and defend the public image of the Islamic Boarding School. The Alumni Intellectual Network functions as the gatekeeper of information (*Gatekeeper*) and crisis defenders (*Reputation Defender*). In religious

contexts, this mechanism often manifests as a reputation for silence (*Silent Reputation*), where a positive image is formed through the achievements and daily behavior of alumni in various professional sectors (academics, politics, government, media), instead of formal public relations campaigns. Understanding this mechanism is crucial to conceptualize *Public Relations* (PR) is value-based, which emphasizes the quality of long-term relationships over short-term transactions. The relevance of this theme lies in the disclosure of invisible communication channels that have a much greater and more credible impact than official institutional channels.

The role of alumni as *Gatekeeper* and *Defender* proven to be the main mechanism in maintaining the image of Islamic Boarding Schools in the public space. Public Relations realizes that alumni responses in the media are often more effective in reducing issues than official releases of Islamic Boarding Schools. "We always monitor if there are negative issues that arise, especially on social media. However, the most powerful response is not from us, but from alumni who have a network there. They can lobby, clarify, or even mediate directly. The impact is more instant and trusted by the external public (*I_kh_2025*)."

This is in line with what was expressed by one of the influential alumni who is a politician, "Our task is not only to promote Islamic Boarding School. We are a reflection of life. When a friend or colleague doubts us, we show our achievements, that's real homework. When the Islamic Boarding School is hit by problems, it is a moral responsibility to defend. Not because I was told, but because there was an inner bond (*I_AP_2025*)."

Through the results of the interviews conducted with the informants above, it is clear that the Alumni Intellectual Network acts as a line of defense of informal reputation. Influential alumni, who already have credibility in their fields, use their professional networks to neutralize or correct negative narratives about Islamic Boarding Schools. This goes beyond the traditional PR concept of relying solely on official channels. This phenomenon underscores the power of *word-of-mouth* which is supported by intellectual authority and strategic position. Therefore, *Public Relations* The pesantren shifted from a one-way information model to a mediating relationship model (alumni as mediators). This network ensures that the Islamic Boarding School has a 'reputation guarantor' in various spectrums of society, making the positive image of the Islamic Boarding School a collective asset that is maintained together.

Moreover *Reputation Building* by the Alumni Intellectual Network is coordinated informally through a non-institutional mechanism. Physically, there are two digital communication groups (WhatsApp and Telegram) that accommodate thousands of alumni with professional segmentation. Second, in at least three cases of major media crises over the past two years, the clarifications received by the public were positively sourced from alumni statements in the mass media (who incidentally were senior academics/scholars) rather than official press releases from Islamic boarding schools. Third, the Alumni

Intellectual Network has an independent donation platform that routinely distributes scholarships and infrastructure assistance without going through the main Foundation. It is physical evidence of how resource support and image support run in parallel through an independent channel initiated by alumni. Departing from this, the form of reputation mechanism found is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Alumni Intellectual Network Informal Reputation Mechanism

Mechanism	Roles	Impact
Public Information Gatekeeper	Control the narrative Clarify sensitive issues in the mass media.	Maintaining the authenticity and credibility of pesantren information beyond the reach of Public Relations.
Reputation Defender Crisis	Using professional authority to mitigate crises Conducting political/ media lobbying.	Creating collective reputation protection that is more responsive and convincing.
Professional Embodiment	Implementing the values of the Islamic Boarding School through professional achievements.	Forming a positive image as a leading institution (long-term asset).

Departing from these findings, it can be seen that the mechanism of the Alumni Intellectual Network in building the reputation of the Islamic Boarding School is a unique combination of informal actions and strategic results. Alumni Intellectual Networks effectively replace the *Public Relations* by acting as a verification agent and moral defender. The pattern that emerges is: the higher the moral affiliation of alumni, the greater their motivation to use their social and intellectual capital for the sake of the institution. These findings expand the framework *Relational PR* by placing inner (emotional) bonds as the foundation of all strategic communication mechanisms, which then manifest as reputational support, policy lobbying, and resource contributions. Therefore, alumni management should focus on maintaining the quality of relationships instead of activity management alone.

Manifestation of Stewardship

Alumni stewardship is understood as an encouragement to serve that grows from moral commitment and gratitude to the alma mater, thus placing them not only as external supporters but as guardians of the values and identity of the pesantren. This orientation is different from the logic of Agency Theory which relies on transactions and rewards. In the pesantren ecosystem, the expression of stewardship is seen not only through financial support but also non-material contributions such as time, expertise, strategic networks, and symbolic legitimacy that they bring as part of the social and intellectual sanad. This pattern makes the Alumni Intellectual Network a strategic PR asset that works organically without formal mechanisms, employment contracts, or

compensation. The three most prominent dimensions in his practice include Emotional Commitment, Moral Obligation, and Resource Contribution. Understanding this dimension is important to formulate how religious institutions maintain and extend the sustainability of non-material social capital.

The main motivation of alumni in contributing comes from a deep sense of ownership and moral obligation. It is a form of devotion that does not expect anything in return. "For us, this Islamic boarding school is not only a school, but a home. I feel indebted to my knowledge and character. The donation of time, energy, or scholarship that I gave was a form of gratitude, not an obligation. This is a Moral Obligation that flows automatically (I_AAk_2025)."

This is in line with what was expressed by the leader of the Islamic Boarding School, "We never beg, but they came alone with projects. Some create a digital financial system, some organize leadership training, and most importantly: they come to pray. They serve the Islamic Boarding School, not because there is a proposal, but because there is love and emotional commitment (I_PP_2025)."

Through the results of the interviews conducted with the informants above, it appears that *Stewardship* in the pesantren alumni environment is an internalized service ethic. Dimension *Moral Obligation* justifying the actions of alumni who use their personal resources for the benefit of the Islamic Boarding School, reflecting a deep understanding of the institution's values. Meanwhile, *Emotional Commitment* serves as a psychological adhesive that guarantees long-term loyalty. The contributions they make—in the form of digital expertise, leadership training, to lobbying—are a form of *Resource Contribution* which is most valuable for Islamic Boarding Schools. Thus, Islamic Boarding School Public Relations does not need to focus on material incentives, but on maintaining narratives about pride, gratitude, and *Moral Obligation*, which is at the heart of motivation *Stewardship*. Departing from this, the form of stewardship manifestation found is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Manifestation of Stewardship of Alumni Network

Stewardship Strategy	Contribution Domains	Results/Benefits
Emotional Commitment	Spiritual and mental affiliation.	Unconditional loyalty, willingness to defend reputation voluntarily.
Moral Obligation	Ethics and ownership of values.	Encourage unsolicited contribution initiatives (volunteer projects, mentoring).
Resource Contribution	Time, Expertise, Network (Social Capital).	Free access to high-level strategic consulting and professional network.

Stewardship is the core paradigm that explains the behavior of the Islamic Boarding School Alumni Intellectual Network. This is not just a theory, but a value that is explicitly articulated by the participants as moral and spiritual bonds. The patterns identified show that the Alumni Intellectual Network is

driven by a Moral Obligation to make a Resource Contribution, the sustainability of which is guaranteed by their Emotional Commitment. These findings make a theoretical contribution by grounding Stewardship Theory into the context of non-profit religious institutions, where transactional motivation is replaced by value-based service motivation. For PR management, this means that alumni relationships must be managed as a value investment, where the institution must first invest in recognition and moral narratives.

Managing Alumni Informal Networks

The challenge of managing an informal alumni network refers to the difficulties faced by Islamic Boarding School Public Relations in harmonizing between the demands of institutional formalities (bureaucracy, structure) and the organic nature of alumni networks (influence without hierarchy, spontaneous initiative). Alumni intellectual networks often have much greater leverage than PR itself, creating unique management challenges. Key challenges include information synchronization, potential politicization, and difficulties in documenting contributions. This theme is important because it highlights an area where traditional PR theory fails, namely in managing relationships where informal authority exceeds formal authority. Public Relations adaptation in facing these challenges determines the sustainability of the Stewardship-Based PR strategy.

The interviews show that the main challenge for Public Relations arises in the tug-of-war between the need for institutional control and the demands of autonomy. On the one hand, Public Relations requires neat and documented data to ensure that the Controlling and Evaluating functions run according to management standards. On the other hand, alumni emphasize flexibility, speed, and initiative space in the Actuating stage. This condition encourages a change in the Public Relations approach from a command-control model to strategic relationship management. In practice, Public Relations plays a role as a guardian of the institution's values as well as documenting the activities of the scattered alumni. The most important adaptation is the construction of bottom-up communication channels that allow information and initiative reports to flow naturally without cutting off network autonomy.

In addition, the adaptation of Public Relations to overcome this challenge is through an asymmetric engagement mechanism. The Public Relations of the Islamic Boarding School is now not trying to control, but focuses on maintenance *Key Person*. For example, Public Relations routinely holds non-formal meetings (*Coffee Session*) with 10-15 core alumni who are considered to be *Leader* on the network, ensuring that important information about the Islamic Boarding School is conveyed, and vice versa, alumni initiatives are recorded. Second, Public Relations has established a voluntary reporting channel that allows alumni to submit summaries of their activities without going through formal procedures, which are then used for publication needs in internal media. Third, to overcome

the potential for politicization, Public Relations explicitly separates alumni activities from practical political interests by implementing an informal code of ethics, one of which is to prohibit the use of Islamic boarding school logos in individual political campaigns.

Discussion

The results of this study show that the Alumni Intellectual Network plays a strategic role in building and maintaining the reputation of the pesantren through mechanisms that are informal but generate significant influence. These findings are in line with the research objectives to develop a stewardship-based public relations model rooted in values, loyalty, and long-term relationships. In the context of globalization and increasing demands for accountability, the reputation of pesantren is not only built through formal strategies, but also through a network of values that live in alumni as non-structural actors who act as credible reputation stewards. The following discussion outlines the three main themes of the research findings, namely informal mechanisms, manifestations of stewardship, and public relations challenges, and relates them to the theory of Stewardship and Relational Public Relations, including comparisons with previous literature.

The informal communication pattern of alumni strengthens the theory of Relational Public Relations which places trust and commitment as the foundation of the organization's relationship with its strategic public (Penning et al., 2024). Alumni function as gatekeepers and reputation defenders, mediate issues and strengthen the image of the pesantren through personal credibility (Maulidy & Zaini, 2025; Fauzi et al., 2025; Farwati, 2024). This phenomenon is in line with studies Buanaputra et al. (2022) highlighting the importance of alumni in the public relations of nonprofit organizations and findings Fatmawati et al. (2023) which suggests that an institution's reputation is often more determined by informal networks than formal channels. However, these findings differ from traditional PR approaches that rely on institutional control. In the context of Islamic boarding schools, reputation is built through a "quiet reputation" formed through alumni actions and moral legitimacy based on sanad knowledge.

Alumni motivation based on emotional commitment and moral obligation shows strong alignment with Stewardship theory (Rouault & Albertini, 2022), which places shared values, trust, and loyalty as the main drivers of long-term contributions. This pattern is contrary to the logic of Agency Theory which is based on personal interests and rewards (Al-Faryan, 2024). This research supports the findings Shaikh (2022) that value-based stewardship creates lasting loyalty as well as non-transactional contributions. Study Singh et al. (2021) It also shows that alumni who have an emotional connection to the institution tend to become donors or advocates without formal compensation. In pesantren, the contribution extends to the symbolic and spiritual realms such as the sustainability of intellectual sanad and solemn practices, making it a

distinctive form of stewardship that has not been widely discussed in the literature.

The results show that the management of informal alumni networks requires an approach that goes beyond the conventional PR model. Challenges arise when formal institutions have to manage non-hierarchical entities that have greater influence. The Relational PR theory by showing that in certain contexts relationships not only need to be managed, but also organically facilitated (Bhargava & Theunissen, 2025). Study Briand et al. (2023) reinforcing the view that the success of strategic PR in the nonprofit sector depends on adaptability to relationships that cannot be completely controlled. In the context of pesantren, these relationships are maintained through a shared moral narrative, the use of bottom-up communication channels, and the implementation of an informal code of ethics to prevent politicization.

This research makes a strategic contribution to the development of education management in Islamic boarding schools, especially in the aspect of managing non-material resources such as alumni networks. Practically, these findings offer a new framework for pesantren leaders in building an alumni relations system that does not depend on formal bureaucracy, but on the bond of values, moral affiliation, and a sense of belonging to the institution. From a managerial perspective, this study recommends a paradigm shift in the management of Islamic educational institutions: from a transactional administrative model to a participatory stewardship model. This model places alumni not as passive supporters, but as strategic partners in shaping public legitimacy and institutional sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the Alumni Intellectual Network plays a strategic role in building the reputation of the pesantren through informal communication patterns that work beyond formal organizational structures while strengthening the legitimacy of the institution in the public space. The findings show that emotional bonds and a sense of moral responsibility encourage alumni to act as credible stewards of reputation through value-based contributions rather than transactional interests. The emerging stewardship model is characterized by non-material contributions, long-term loyalty, and service-based relationship patterns, thus replacing the instructional and managerial PR approach. At the same time, the adaptation of Public Relations in managing this network shows that structural flexibility, management of key relationships, and recognition of alumni autonomy are important strategies in maintaining institutional reputation. Thus, this study fills a gap in the literature regarding the role of alumni in the public relations of religious institutions and opens up opportunities for the application of value-based relationship models in non-profit institutions and other community educational institutions.

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