
Barriers and catalysts in building the institutional image of a *pondok pesantren*

ROPITA ROPITA^{1*}, ARIS DWI NUGROHO², AND SUCI FITRIANI³

Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing the institutional image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* in Jambi by identifying both internal catalysts and barriers that shape public perception. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation involving *pesantren* leaders, teachers, and parents. The findings indicate that visionary leadership, strong support from the foundation, and continuous student achievements—particularly in religious competitions such as the Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ)—serve as key catalysts in strengthening the *pesantren's* image. Visionary leadership fosters discipline, academic excellence, and moral integrity, while foundation support provides institutional stability. However, the study also identifies major barriers, including limited shared understanding of strategic goals among internal stakeholders, human resource constraints in digital communication and public relations, and challenges in managing time and institutional priorities. These barriers hinder the consistent implementation of image-building strategies. The study recommends improving internal communication, enhancing digital competencies, and strengthening priority management to sustain a positive institutional image.

Keywords

Human resource constraints, institutional image, *Pondok pesantren*, leadership, student achievement

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^{1*}Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia, Corresponding author:
pitaa1803@gmail.com

^{2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia

Introduction

Pondok pesantren represent one of the oldest and most influential forms of Islamic education in Indonesia, playing a fundamental role in shaping students' moral character, religious understanding, and intellectual development. Historically, *pesantren* have functioned not only as educational institutions but also as centers of social, cultural, and religious authority within their communities. In recent decades, however, *pesantren* have increasingly been required to adapt to changing social expectations, educational competition, and public scrutiny. As a result, institutional image has emerged as a critical factor influencing public trust, student enrollment, and long-term sustainability (Muafiah et al., 2022; Nurkhin et al., 2023).

In contemporary educational environments, institutional image significantly affects stakeholders' perceptions and decision-making processes, particularly among parents and prospective students. Educational institutions are no longer evaluated solely based on curriculum content or religious legitimacy but also on leadership quality, governance practices, communication strategies, and social responsibility (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Rusydi, 2025). For Islamic boarding schools, this shift places *pesantren* in a complex position: they must preserve religious authenticity while simultaneously demonstrating professionalism, accountability, and adaptability. *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* in Jambi exemplifies this condition, having experienced increasing public recognition and student enrollment while continuing to face internal and external challenges related to image formation.

The image of an educational institution is widely understood as a multidimensional construct formed through both tangible and intangible components. Tangible elements include facilities, academic programs, and student achievements, while intangible elements encompass leadership credibility, institutional values, public communication, and community engagement (Kotler & Fox, 1995). In *pesantren* contexts, these dimensions are further intertwined with moral authority, religious trust, and cultural expectations. Consequently, the formation of a positive *pesantren* image requires not only strong educational outcomes but also effective leadership, transparent governance, and consistent communication with stakeholders (Kurniasari et al., 2019; Nashuddin, 2020).

Leadership has been identified as a key determinant in shaping the image and reputation of Islamic educational institutions. Visionary leadership enables *pesantren* leaders to articulate institutional values clearly, align internal stakeholders with strategic goals, and respond constructively to societal change. Recent studies emphasize that leadership characterized by integrity, role modeling, and strategic foresight contributes significantly to institutional credibility and public trust (Djufri & Raprayogha, 2025; Rusydi, 2025). In *pesantren* settings, leaders often hold dual roles as educational administrators and religious figures, making their actions and communication particularly influential in shaping public perception.

Beyond leadership, communication and public relations practices play an increasingly important role in institutional image-building. In the digital era, *pesantren* are expected to maintain an active and responsible presence in both offline and online spaces. Research on Islamic educational institutions indicates that strategic communication, including engagement through social and cultural activities and digital media, positively influences institutional image (Nurkhin et al., 2023; Wahyudi, 2020). However, effective communication requires

organizational capacity, including skilled human resources, clear internal coordination, and adequate time allocation—factors that are often constrained in *pesantren* environments.

Despite growing scholarly attention to *pesantren* leadership and communication, existing studies tend to examine these aspects separately. Some research focuses primarily on leadership effectiveness without sufficiently addressing internal organizational barriers that limit implementation (Rusydi, 2025). Other studies emphasize digital transformation or public engagement but overlook the internal capacity challenges faced by *pesantren*, such as limited human resources and competing institutional priorities (Muafiah et al., 2022). As a result, the interaction between enabling factors (catalysts) and constraining factors (barriers) in shaping *pesantren* image remains insufficiently explored. Furthermore, much of the literature on *pesantren* image and governance concentrates on large or well-established institutions located in urban centers. This focus leaves a gap in understanding the experiences of *pesantren* in regional or smaller-city contexts, where access to resources, professional expertise, and institutional networks may be more limited (Nashuddin, 2020; Nurkhin et al., 2023). *Pesantren* operating in regional areas often face distinct challenges related to human resource availability, technological capacity, and community expectations, all of which influence their ability to manage and project a positive institutional image.

Recent studies suggest that *pesantren* image is also shaped by broader institutional reforms, including the adoption of Islamic corporate governance principles, child-friendly education policies, and environmentally oriented programs such as eco-*pesantren* initiatives (Kurniasari et al., 2019; Muafiah et al., 2022). These initiatives contribute positively to public perception when implemented effectively and communicated transparently. However, inconsistencies in governance practices, limited internal understanding of strategic goals, and time management constraints can undermine their impact, particularly when *pesantren* leaders and staff are overwhelmed by core educational and religious responsibilities.

Given these gaps, there is a clear need for research that simultaneously examines both the catalysts and barriers influencing *pesantren* image within a specific local context. Understanding how leadership strength, institutional support, and student achievements interact with internal challenges such as communication gaps, human resource limitations, and priority management is essential for developing a comprehensive perspective on image formation. This is particularly relevant for *pesantren* in regional settings, where contextual factors play a significant role in shaping institutional capacity and public perception.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the enabling and constraining factors that shape the institutional image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* in Jambi. By employing a qualitative approach, the research seeks to capture the perspectives of key stakeholders and to explore how leadership practices, organizational dynamics, and resource constraints influence image-building processes. The study contributes to the literature on Islamic educational management by providing empirical insights from a regional *pesantren* context and offers practical recommendations for *pesantren* leaders seeking to strengthen public trust, institutional credibility, and long-term sustainability.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the internal factors that support and hinder the enhancement of the institutional image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*

in Jambi. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because institutional image, leadership practices, and public perception are socially constructed phenomena that require an in-depth understanding of meanings, experiences, and contextual dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through qualitative inquiry, the study seeks to capture how internal stakeholders perceive strategic goals, communication processes, and organizational challenges related to image-building within a *pesantren* setting.

Research design

The research was conducted at *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, an Islamic boarding school located in Jambi, Indonesia. The *pesantren* was selected purposively because it represents a regional Islamic educational institution that has experienced growing public recognition while simultaneously facing internal organizational challenges. Case-based qualitative research enables researchers to examine institutional processes holistically and contextually, making it particularly suitable for studies of educational organizations operating within specific socio-cultural environments (Yin, 2018).

Data collection methods

Data were collected using two primary qualitative techniques: in-depth interviews and participatory observation. The combination of these methods enables methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of qualitative findings (Tracy, 2020). In-depth interviews were conducted with key internal stakeholders, including *pesantren* leaders, teaching staff, administrative staff, and several parents of students. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they were directly involved in institutional management, educational activities, or decision-making related to student enrollment. This sampling strategy is commonly used in qualitative studies to obtain information-rich data from individuals who have relevant experience and knowledge (Palinkas et al., 2019).

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility for participants to express their views while ensuring that key themes—such as leadership practices, internal communication, human resource capacity, and image-building efforts—were consistently explored. Semi-structured interviews are effective in educational and organizational research because they encourage depth while maintaining analytical focus (Kallio et al., 2016). All interviews were conducted in a conversational manner to promote openness and authenticity, and participants were informed about the study's purpose prior to data collection.

In addition to interviews, participatory observation was employed to capture everyday interactions and practices within the *pesantren*. The researcher observed daily educational routines, leadership-staff interactions, student activities, and communication practices with the surrounding community. Observational data provided contextual insight into how institutional values and strategies were enacted in practice, complementing interview data by revealing behavioral patterns that might not be explicitly articulated by participants (Angrosino, 2018).

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and subsequent refinements from the methodological literature. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns across qualitative datasets, particularly in studies examining organizational processes and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, interview transcripts and observation notes were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated to capture meaningful units related to leadership, communication, human resource capacity, time management, and institutional image. Third, these codes were organized into broader themes representing both enabling and constraining factors. The themes were then reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and relevant theoretical frameworks.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied key qualitative quality criteria, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Data triangulation between interviews and observations strengthened the credibility of the findings, while detailed documentation of analytical procedures enhanced transparency.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by omitting identifiable information. Ethical sensitivity is particularly important in educational and religious research contexts, where power relations and moral authority may influence participant responses (Tracy, 2020).

Findings

Barriers from internal management and communication

Based on the interviews conducted at *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, several internal challenges hinder the optimal execution of the institution's strategic direction, despite the strong leadership in place. One of the key barriers identified is the lack of uniform understanding among teachers, students, and staff regarding the *pesantren's* strategic goals. While the leadership has a clear vision for the institution, there are gaps in how policies and initiatives are communicated and understood at the ground level. This lack of alignment creates difficulties in implementing the established strategies effectively.

Lack of uniform understanding

Challenges arising from the lack of alignment among teachers, students, and staff regarding the *pesantren's* strategic direction. Despite strong leadership, there are gaps in how policies are understood and implemented at the ground level. One of the key findings of this

study is the lack of uniform understanding among teachers, students, and staff regarding the *pesantren's* strategic direction. Despite strong leadership, there are gaps in how policies and strategies are communicated, understood, and implemented at the ground level. This misalignment creates challenges in the effective execution of established policies, which ultimately hinders the successful implementation of strategic goals. Based on the interviews, there is an inconsistent understanding of the *pesantren's* strategic goals among teachers, students, and staff, despite clear direction from the leadership. As stated by the leader:

“One of the greatest challenges we face is the lack of a shared understanding of the *pesantren's* policies and strategic goals. Although the leadership has clearly planned and directed these policies, teachers, students, and administrators do not always fully understand their intended purpose. As a result, well-designed policies are not always implemented optimally by all parties involved.”

Furthermore, the Head of Public Relations also pointed out that while there are a clear vision and mission for the *pesantren*, the implementation is often inconsistent:

“Although we already have clear vision and mission statements, there are times when policies established by the leadership are not fully accepted or understood by all parties at the operational level. We often find that the strategies that have been formulated are not implemented in a consistent manner by everyone in the *pesantren*. This situation hinders the process of developing a more directed and consistent institutional image.”

This statement underscores that misalignment between leadership and execution creates challenges in maintaining a focused, consistent effort to improve the *pesantren's* image. Without a uniform understanding across all levels, efforts to build branding and reputation can become fragmented and less effective. The staff member's perspective adds further insight into the problem, stating:

“We often feel that although guidance has been provided by the leadership, the implementation of policies in practice does not always meet expectations. Some staff members and teachers do not yet fully understand the objectives of these policies, which makes their implementation less effective. More time and improved communication are needed so that all parties can fully understand and properly implement the existing policies.”

These internal barriers, including a lack of uniform understanding, human resource limitations, and time management issues, contribute to the challenges *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* faces in effectively promoting its image and achieving its strategic goals. Addressing these issues is essential for improving the *pesantren's* overall performance and ensuring its long-term success.

Human resource limitations

The limited skills in areas such as public communication, technology use, and digital marketing hinder the optimal performance of internal teams, especially in adapting to modern

media strategies. One of the key findings of this study is the issue of human resource limitations, particularly in public communication, technology use, and digital marketing. These limitations hinder the optimal performance of internal teams, especially when it comes to adapting to modern media strategies. The lack of specialized skills in these areas creates challenges in executing effective branding and communication strategies, ultimately affecting the *pesantren's* ability to reach a broader audience and build a strong public image. The lack of specialized skills in these areas hinders the optimal performance of internal teams, especially when adapting to modern media strategies. As the Head of Public Relations explains:

“We face a skills gap, particularly in the areas of digital media management and public relations. Although we have a dedicated team, not everyone possesses the technical skills required to manage social media, produce videos, or create digital content. This situation makes it difficult for us to operate effectively in a world that increasingly relies on digital presence to build a positive image. We lack personnel with expertise in this area, which slows our ability to adapt to digital trends.”

This statement underscores how limited skills in modern media management hinder the ability of the *pesantren* to fully utilize digital platforms for image-building. The growing reliance on technology and digital media to promote institutions means that without the right expertise, the *pesantren* struggles to keep up with competitors who are more adept at leveraging these tools. The leader's interview reinforces this issue, acknowledging that while efforts are being made, the lack of digital expertise is a significant challenge:

“One of the challenges we face is that not all of our staff are equipped with the skills required to manage digital platforms effectively. Our public relations team has made strong efforts, but there is a significant learning curve in utilizing the latest digital marketing tools. This situation affects our ability to produce high-quality content and to reach the audiences needed to build a strong institutional image.”

The leader's interview highlights that while efforts are being made to address these gaps, the lack of skilled personnel in technology and communication is a major challenge. The need for specialized knowledge in digital marketing and media content creation is crucial for the *pesantren's* efforts to enhance its public image. The staff's perspective sheds light on the practical difficulties they face due to the small size of their team and the lack of specialized personnel:

“Our team is small, and most of us have additional responsibilities beyond handling media-related tasks. The lack of personnel with expertise in design, videography, or digital content management makes it difficult for us to keep up with the growing demand for content. At times, we do not have sufficient time or resources to produce the high-quality content needed to attract attention and maintain a positive image.”

This staff member's perspective further emphasizes the issue of resource constraints, particularly the challenge of balancing the workload of a small team. Without dedicated

personnel focused on digital content creation, the *pesantren*'s efforts to establish a strong and consistent online presence are limited.

Human resource limitations in areas such as public communication, technology utilization, and digital marketing are significant barriers to the *pesantren*'s ability to fully embrace modern media strategies. The lack of specialized skills within the team, combined with limited resources, hampers the *pesantren*'s efforts to build a more robust digital presence. For the *pesantren* to remain competitive and improve its public image, addressing these human resource gaps and investing in skills development in digital media and communication is essential.

Time and priority management

The struggle to balance numerous educational and religious programs with activities directly related to the branding and promotion of the *pesantren*. This affects the consistent focus on image-building efforts. One of the key barriers identified in the study is time and priority management.

The *pesantren* faces significant challenges in balancing numerous educational and religious programs with activities directly related to branding and promoting the institution. The heavy emphasis on academic and religious responsibilities makes it difficult to allocate sufficient time and resources for consistent image-building efforts, which ultimately affects the *pesantren*'s ability to maintain a sustained focus on promoting its positive image. The struggle with time and priority management is another barrier impacting the *pesantren*'s image-building efforts. The *pesantren* faces challenges in balancing the numerous educational and religious programs with activities directly related to branding and promotion. As the leader mentions:

“We have many religious and educational activities that must be carried out, which often causes activities directly related to the promotion and branding of the *pesantren* to be overlooked. There are many important programs that need to be implemented, and at times, image promotion has to be postponed because our primary focus remains on teaching and student development. We hope to achieve a better balance in managing time and priorities so that promotional activities can continue without compromising our educational programs.”

According to the interview with the leader, the *pesantren* struggles to prioritize branding and promotion due to the overwhelming demands of its educational and religious programs. The leader acknowledges the need for a better balance between managing academic activities and allocating resources for promoting the *pesantren*'s image. This imbalance often leads to the sidelining of promotional activities, thereby affecting the consistency and effectiveness of efforts to build a positive public image. The Head of Public Relations also acknowledges the same challenge:

“We are highly focused on the religious and educational activities carried out at the *pesantren*. Although promoting the *pesantren* and building a positive image are important, these activities are sometimes constrained by the large number of internal programs that must be implemented. We often feel that branding-related activities should be given

higher priority; however, the greatest challenge is ensuring that they do not disrupt the educational schedules that have already been planned.”

The head of public relations also highlights the challenge of balancing internal programs with branding efforts. They acknowledge the importance of promotion but recognize that the sheer volume of internal activities, such as religious and educational events, often takes precedence. This ongoing struggle to prioritize time and activities can limit the team’s effectiveness in creating consistent, focused promotional content. In the staff interview, the issue of managing time between educational duties and promotional tasks is also highlighted:

“As staff members directly involved in daily activities, we often find it difficult to give full attention to promotional activities due to the many programs that must be carried out. Religious and educational activities remain the main priorities, while *pesantren* branding is frequently constrained. We hope that a better time management system can be established so that both can be implemented more effectively and in a more balanced manner.”

In the staff interview, the respondent reiterates the difficulty in managing time between educational/religious duties and branding efforts. The focus on internal activities often leaves little room for consistent promotional work. The staff member expresses a desire for a better time management system that would allow for both educational responsibilities and image-building activities to be addressed without compromising the quality of either.

The struggle with time and priority management is a significant barrier to the *pesantren*’s efforts to build its image. The overwhelming focus on educational and religious programs often pushes branding and promotional activities to the background. To improve the consistency of image-building efforts, it is crucial for the *pesantren* to develop a more effective system for balancing priorities, ensuring that both educational responsibilities and public relations work receive the attention they deserve. This could ultimately help in maintaining a strong, consistent public image while continuing to deliver high-quality education and religious services.

Internal strengths that drive positive image formation

Based on the interview with the leadership and staff at *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, several internal strengths were identified as key drivers in forming a positive image for the institution. One of the most significant factors is the visionary leadership demonstrated by the *pesantren*’s leaders. The leadership’s focus on setting high standards for students’ academic and character development directly affects how the *pesantren* is perceived by the public. The leader’s ability to serve as a role model and lead by example helps create a culture of discipline, respect, and excellence, which resonates throughout the *pesantren* and positively influences its external image.

Leadership and role modelling

Based on the interview with the leadership of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, leadership and role modeling are central to the institution's strategy for enhancing its image. The leader emphasized that the focus is not merely on talking about the *pesantren's* image, but on demonstrating it through real actions. As stated by the leader:

“We strive not merely to talk about the *pesantren's* image, but rather to demonstrate concretely that *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* truly deserves the trust and positive evaluation of the community. My principle is simple: ‘these are our students, these are our *pesantren*, and these are our achievements, let the community judge for itself.’ I prefer to show tangible results rather than engage in excessive rhetoric, as I am concerned that making too many promises or statements may not align with the expectations of the wider community.” (In English)

This statement reflects the leadership's commitment to leading by example. The emphasis on showing real achievements and actions rather than making empty promises is a key aspect of building trust and credibility. It demonstrates the importance of leadership that is consistent with its values and vision, fostering a strong sense of responsibility within the community.

Furthermore, the role of leadership is not limited to just overseeing operations. It extends to serving as a moral and ethical role model for both staff and students. The leader plays a crucial role in ensuring that the *pesantren's* values—discipline, dedication to knowledge, and respect for Islamic principles—are reflected in the behavior of everyone involved in the *pesantren*. This is evident in how the leader actively participates in the daily activities of the *pesantren*, setting an example in behavior, work ethic, and commitment to the mission. As one of the staff members mentioned in the interview:

“Leadership here is not only about talking about the values that must be upheld, but about living them daily. The example set by the leaders greatly influences all of us, both teachers and students. This creates an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, which is essential for maintaining a positive image of the *pesantren*.” (In Bahasa)

This further underscores how the leader's direct involvement and personal example significantly shape the institution's perception. The leader's active participation and ethical conduct help in setting the tone for the entire community, making the *pesantren* a place where values are not only taught but also lived by everyone involved.

Strong support from the foundation

Based on the interviews, strong support from the foundation is crucial role in reinforcing the positive image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*. The foundation provides consistent backing, both in terms of financial resources and guidance, which enables the *pesantren* to run smoothly and develop effectively. The leadership of the *pesantren* highlighted the significant role of the foundation's support:

“The three main strengths that currently drive the positive image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* are strong support from the foundation, leadership oriented toward role modeling, and the continuous achievements of the students. Support from the foundation is highly significant, as it provides adequate resources, both financially and in terms of policies that support the development of the *pesantren*. The foundation consistently offers clear guidance and ensures that every program implemented is aligned with the vision and mission of the *pesantren*.”

This statement highlights that the foundation’s support is integral to the institution’s ability to maintain a positive image. The consistent financial support and clear direction provided by the foundation help the *pesantren* align its activities with its core values and goals.

“One of the greatest advantages of strong support from the foundation is the stability it provides. We know that we can rely on the foundation to support the educational programs and facilities needed for improvement. This makes our work easier, as we are able to focus on enhancing the quality of education and student development without having to worry about funding or resource availability.”

This staff member underscored how the foundation's reliable support helps create a stable environment for both staff and students. With assurance of financial and resource support, the *pesantren* can focus more on delivering high-quality education and fostering student growth, thereby strengthening its reputation and image.

These interviews clearly indicate that the foundation's consistent support, through both resources and strategic guidance, is a fundamental pillar that helps enhance *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*'s positive image. This support not only facilitates smooth operations but also boosts the institution's credibility and ensures alignment with its long-term mission.

Continuous achievements of students

Based on the interview with the leadership and staff at *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, the continuous achievements of students, particularly in competitions like the Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur’an (MTQ), play a significant role in enhancing the institution's image. These achievements are seen as a direct reflection of the *pesantren*'s quality of education and character development, and they help to build a strong reputation within the community.

“One of the main strategies we use to enhance the image of the *pesantren* is by highlighting the active role of our students in various positive activities, both religious and social. One concrete step we have taken is encouraging our students to achieve excellence, particularly in events such as MTQ. This field is closely related to the character of the *pesantren* and has become a source of pride for our institution. Praise be to God, several of our students have achieved significant accomplishments at the city, provincial, and even national levels.”

This statement highlights the importance of student achievements in competitions like MTQ as a catalyst for improving the *pesantren's* image. The pride in the students' success not only reflects the institution's commitment to academic and religious excellence but also strengthens its public perception as a place where students thrive both academically and spiritually.

“We are very proud of the achievements attained by our students, particularly in the field of MTQ. Their success is not only about winning competitions but also demonstrates that the values we instill in them have a tangible impact. When our students perform well at national-level MTQ events, it enhances the profile of our *pesantren*. This shows the public that we are serious about developing students who excel not only in religious studies but also in social engagement.”

This further emphasizes how student success in such prestigious events not only boosts morale within the *pesantren* but also serves as a visible demonstration of the *pesantren's* educational quality. Achievements like these position *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* as an institution that produces outstanding individuals who can contribute meaningfully to society.

“I am very proud to be a student here, especially because of the many achievements our *pesantren* has attained, particularly in the field of MTQ. Some of our students have even competed at the national level, which is a great honor for all of us. This is something we take pride in and share with our friends and families. It gives a good reputation to the *pesantren*, and we all feel that we are part of something that is respected by the community.”

The student's perspective reveals that the institution's achievements in competitions, particularly MTQ, foster a sense of pride among students. Their success not only elevates their own confidence but also plays a crucial role in building the positive image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, as it reflects the *pesantren's* dedication to excellence and the development of capable, accomplished individuals.

These interviews show that student achievements, especially in events like MTQ, are not only a testament to the quality of education and leadership at *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, but they also serve as powerful tools for enhancing the institution's image. These successes help to position the *pesantren* as a respected educational institution that produces students who excel in both religious and academic fields, strengthening its reputation in the eyes of the community.

Discussion

Barriers from internal management and communication: Lack of uniform understanding

One of the most significant internal barriers affecting the institutional image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* is the lack of uniform understanding of strategic goals among teachers, students, and administrative staff. Although the leadership has articulated a clear vision and

established formal policies, these strategic intentions are not consistently translated into daily practices across organizational levels. This misalignment weakens policy execution and reduces the effectiveness of institutional image-building efforts. When internal stakeholders lack a coherent understanding of institutional priorities, image-related initiatives tend to be fragmented and inconsistently implemented.

From an organizational communication perspective, internal alignment is a prerequisite for effective strategy implementation. Organizational communication functions as the mechanism through which individual actions are coordinated to achieve shared objectives; when communication is unclear or unevenly distributed, strategic coherence deteriorates (Jones et al., 2004). In educational institutions, this challenge is particularly pronounced because multiple actors—leaders, teachers, staff, and students—interact daily and collectively shape institutional representation. Without structured communication channels and continuous reinforcement of strategic goals, institutional messages risk being interpreted differently by each group.

Recent studies in educational management confirm that communication barriers significantly affect human resource performance and institutional quality. Darwin Nasution and Kieser (2024) argue that weak internal communication reduces organizational effectiveness by limiting shared understanding and collective commitment. In the context of *pesantren*, where hierarchical respect and religious authority are central, ineffective communication may also discourage feedback and clarification, further reinforcing misunderstandings. As a result, even well-designed policies may fail to generate consistent behavioral alignment.

This finding suggests that the challenge faced by *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* is not unique but reflects a broader organizational issue common in educational institutions undergoing modernization. Strategic communication must move beyond top-down instruction toward inclusive and continuous engagement. Scholars emphasize that participatory communication mechanisms—such as regular coordination meetings, internal training, and feedback loops—are essential to ensure shared ownership of institutional goals (Wuersch et al., 2024). Without such mechanisms, institutional image-building becomes overly dependent on leadership symbolism rather than collective practice.

Therefore, strengthening internal communication systems is critical for sustaining a positive institutional image. Ensuring that all stakeholders understand and internalize strategic objectives allows *pesantren* to project a coherent identity externally. In the absence of a uniform understanding, institutional image remains vulnerable to inconsistency, undermining public trust and long-term credibility.

Human resource limitations in digital communication and public relations

Another major barrier to effective image-building at *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* is the limited human resources, particularly in digital communication, public relations, and technology utilization. In an era where institutional reputation is increasingly shaped by digital platforms, the absence of skilled personnel to manage online communication significantly constrains the *pesantren's* ability to engage broader audiences and control public narratives.

Digital visibility is no longer optional for educational institutions; it has become a central component of reputation management.

Recent organizational studies highlight that modern institutions require digitally competent human resources to implement communication strategies effectively. Wuersch et al. (2024) emphasize that digital internal communication strategies depend heavily on staff digital capabilities, including content creation, platform management, and strategic messaging. When such competencies are lacking, institutions struggle to maintain consistency and credibility in public communication. This condition is evident in *pesantren* contexts, where staff members often manage communication tasks alongside multiple educational and administrative responsibilities.

Furthermore, research on human resource management in the digital transformation era indicates that effective institutional performance relies on skills such as information literacy, digital collaboration, and media engagement (Nurkhin et al., 2023). Without these skills, institutions risk underutilizing digital platforms or relying on ad hoc communication practices that fail to support long-term image-building objectives. In the case of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*, limited human resources mean that digital communication efforts are often reactive rather than strategic, reducing their impact on public perception.

This limitation also reflects structural challenges within *pesantren* organizations. Unlike large educational institutions with specialized public relations units, *pesantren* often depend on small teams with limited training opportunities. Muafiah et al. (2022) argue that while *pesantren* demonstrate strong moral and educational foundations, they frequently lack professional development systems that support modernization, particularly in communication and governance. As a result, image-building becomes constrained by internal capacity rather than institutional intent.

Addressing human resource limitations requires targeted investment in skill development and organizational restructuring. Training programs in digital literacy, content management, and strategic communication can significantly enhance institutional visibility and credibility. Moreover, allocating dedicated roles for communication and public relations can help *pesantren* transition from informal promotion to systematic reputation management. Without strengthening human resource capacity, *pesantren* risk falling behind in an increasingly competitive and media-driven educational environment.

Time and priority management in institutional image-building

The third internal barrier influencing the institutional image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* relates to challenges in time and priority management. As a religious educational institution, the *pesantren* places strong emphasis on academic instruction, spiritual development, and daily religious activities. While these core functions are essential to the institution's identity, they often dominate organizational priorities, leaving limited time and resources for structured branding and public communication efforts. Consequently, image-building activities tend to be secondary, inconsistent, and inadequately planned.

Research on strategy implementation consistently identifies time constraints and competing priorities as major obstacles to effective organizational change. Institutions frequently struggle to balance routine operational demands with strategic initiatives,

particularly when human resources are limited (Jones et al., 2004). In educational settings, this challenge is intensified by rigid academic schedules and moral responsibilities that are perceived as non-negotiable. As a result, promotional activities are often postponed or treated as supplementary rather than strategic.

Studies on educational communication further indicate that when institutions fail to allocate specific time and resources to public engagement, image management becomes fragmented and reactive (Wahyudi, 2020). This pattern is evident in *pesantren* environments, where promotional efforts are often event-based rather than sustained. Without a structured schedule and clear prioritization, communication outputs lack continuity and coherence, weakening institutional identity in the public sphere.

Moreover, ineffective priority management can amplify other internal barriers, such as communication gaps and human resource limitations. When staff are overburdened with multiple responsibilities, opportunities for coordination, evaluation, and innovation in image-building are reduced. Nurkhin et al. (2023) argue that strategic resource allocation is essential for sustaining institutional reputation, particularly in environments where public accountability is increasing.

To overcome this barrier, *pesantren* leadership must integrate image-building into institutional planning rather than treating it as an auxiliary function. Establishing clear timelines, delegating responsibilities, and aligning promotional activities with educational programs can help create balance. Effective time and priority management enable *pesantren* to maintain their educational mission while simultaneously strengthening public trust and institutional visibility.

Internal strengths driving positive institutional image formation

Despite the internal challenges identified, *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* possesses significant internal strengths that actively contribute to a positive institutional image. These strengths include visionary leadership, strong support from the foundation, and continuous student achievements. Together, these factors create a foundation of credibility, stability, and excellence that enhances public trust and reinforces the *pesantren's* reputation.

Visionary leadership plays a central role in shaping institutional identity. Leaders who embody institutional values and demonstrate ethical consistency influence both internal culture and external perception. Leadership scholarship emphasizes that role modeling is one of the most effective mechanisms for transmitting values and shaping organizational behavior (Northouse, 2018). In *pesantren* contexts, where leaders are viewed as moral authorities, their conduct directly affects public confidence. Rusydi (2025) further argues that visionary leadership in Islamic boarding schools enables institutions to balance tradition and modernization without compromising religious integrity.

Another critical strength is the strong and consistent support provided by the foundation. Financial stability and strategic guidance allow the *pesantren* to focus on educational quality rather than survival concerns. Kurniasari et al. (2019) note that governance support enhances institutional credibility by ensuring accountability, transparency, and program continuity. This stability signals reliability to the public and strengthens long-term reputation.

Finally, continuous student achievements—particularly in religious competitions such as Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ)—serve as visible indicators of institutional success. Student performance reflects the effectiveness of educational and character-building processes, reinforcing positive public perception. Muafiah et al. (2022) emphasize that student achievements function as symbolic capital, enhancing institutional legitimacy and pride within the community.

Collectively, these internal strengths counterbalance existing barriers and provide strategic assets for image-building. When leveraged systematically through effective communication and organizational alignment, leadership, institutional support, and student success can sustain a strong and positive institutional image for *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah*.

This study examined the internal barriers and catalysts that influence the institutional image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* in Jambi. The findings indicate that the *pesantren's* positive public image is strongly supported by visionary leadership, consistent foundation support, and continuous student achievements, particularly in religious competitions such as the Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ). These factors contribute to institutional credibility, stability, and public trust.

At the same time, the study reveals significant internal challenges that limit the consistency of image-building efforts. These include a lack of shared understanding of strategic goals among internal stakeholders, limited human resource capacity in digital communication and public relations, and difficulties in managing time and institutional priorities. Together, these barriers weaken policy implementation and reduce the effectiveness of promotional and communication strategies.

The findings suggest that strengthening internal communication, developing digital and communication competencies, and integrating image-building into institutional planning are essential for sustaining a positive and coherent institutional image. By addressing these challenges while continuing to leverage its internal strengths, *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* can enhance its public reputation and ensure long-term sustainability in an increasingly competitive educational environment.

This study examined the barriers and catalysts that influence the image of *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* in Jambi and revealed that institutional image formation is shaped by a combination of internal strengths and organizational challenges. Visionary leadership, strong support from the foundation, and continuous student achievements were identified as the primary catalysts that contribute positively to the *pesantren's* public perception. Leadership that emphasizes role modeling, discipline, and academic as well as moral excellence has fostered trust and credibility, while consistent foundation support has provided organizational stability and strategic direction. Student achievements, particularly in religious and academic competitions, further reinforce the *pesantren's* reputation as a high-quality Islamic educational institution.

Despite these strengths, the study also identified significant internal barriers that hinder optimal image development. These include a lack of uniform understanding of strategic goals among internal stakeholders, limitations in human resources—especially in digital communication and media management—and challenges in balancing educational priorities with branding activities. Such barriers reduce the consistency and effectiveness of image-building efforts and limit the *pesantren's* ability to adapt to modern communication demands.

In conclusion, while *Pondok Pesantren Ar-Rahmah* possesses strong foundational assets that support a positive institutional image, addressing internal communication gaps, investing in human resource development, and improving time and priority management are essential for sustainable image enhancement. Strengthening these areas will enable the *pesantren* to maintain its educational mission while positioning itself more effectively in an increasingly competitive and digitally driven educational landscape.

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