

RELIGIOUS SOCIAL PROOF: MEASURING THE IMPACT OF USING INFLUENCERS AND RELIGIOUS FIGURES IN MARKETING CAMPAIGNS FOR ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to measure the impact of religious social proof through the use of influencers and religious leaders in the marketing campaign of Islamic boarding school (pesantren) education in the era of social media. The research employed a qualitative approach with a field study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation at Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Asy-Syafi'iyah Darul Qur'an Kundur Utara. Data analysis used Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while data validity was examined through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time. The findings reveal that the combination of influencers and kyai significantly expands audience reach, religious social proof drives the increase of new student enrollment, and alumni testimonies serve as a social legitimacy instrument that strengthens the pesantren's image. This research contributes to the development of Islamic education communication strategies in the digital era, particularly in optimizing social media as a medium for da'wah and pesantren promotion without losing its religious authenticity.

Keywords: social proof, religious, pesantren, influencer, alumni.

A. Introduction

The development of social media in the digital era has revolutionized communication patterns within educational institutions, including pesantren, which have long been characterized by oral traditions and kinship networks. In the past, pesantren relied primarily on the charisma of the kyai and the influence of alumni to attract public interest. Today, however, social media offers a broader, more interactive, and dynamic space. Social facts show that pesantren face the challenge of maintaining

the authenticity of their religious values while adapting to the digital communication styles of younger generations. In this context, religious social proof serves as a strategic instrument, combining the kyai's spiritual authority, the visual and linguistic appeal of influencers, and the social legitimacy of alumni testimonials. Together, these elements work simultaneously to construct a positive image of the pesantren and increase the enrollment of new santri.

The urgency of this study emerges from real-world observations, where collaborations between kyai and influencers have proven effective in expanding audience reach on digital platforms. The kyai provide an irreplaceable dimension of religiosity and moral legitimacy, while influencers present dakwah messages in a fresher, more creative, and youth-friendly style. Alumni testimonials further strengthen the narrative that pesantren are not merely traditional institutions but also modern educational entities relevant to contemporary demands. This phenomenon aligns with Cialdini's social proof theory, which emphasizes the influence of authority and popularity in shaping social decisions, including educational choices.

From an academic standpoint, this research offers novelty by integrating three main actors—kyai, influencers, and alumni—into a unified framework of pesantren educational marketing based on social media. Previous studies have only addressed parts of this phenomenon. For instance, Hidayat (2020) highlighted the role of social media in increasing pesantren exposure but did not specifically examine the role of influencers. Azhar (2021) found that influencers contribute to greater youth engagement in digital dakwah content, while Wahyudi (2022) emphasized the influence of alumni in shaping the reputation of Islamic education through success testimonials. However, no prior research has

integrated these three actors as components of religious social proof in pesantren marketing. Therefore, this study offers a new perspective by demonstrating how collaboration among religious leaders, influencers, and alumni can serve as a strategic force to strengthen image, build public trust, and enhance the competitiveness of pesantren in the digital era.

B. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of religious social proof in pesantren education marketing within the context of social media. This approach was chosen to capture the social dynamics, religious narratives, and communication strategies employed by kyai, alumni, influencers, and pesantren administrators in attracting community interest. The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Asy-Syafi'iyah Darul Qur'an, located in North Kunder, which represents a salafiyah pesantren with a strong scholarly tradition that is gradually adapting to digital technology developments.

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted during new santri enrollment events, alumni gatherings, and religious lectures disseminated via social media. In-depth interviews were held with kyai, alumni, Muslim influencers, wali santri, and pesantren administrators to gain insights into the effectiveness of religious social proof in attracting audiences. Documentation—such as photos, digital archives, event videos, and social media posts—served as supporting data to strengthen the findings from observation and interviews.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles & Huberman, consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved filtering relevant information from

interviews and observations. Data display was presented in the form of descriptive narratives, interview excerpts, and visual interpretations of documented activities. Conclusions were drawn thematically, connecting religious social proof, the roles of kyai, alumni, and influencers with the increase in new santri enrollment at the pesantren.

To ensure data validity, the study applied triangulation of sources, techniques, and time. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives from kyai, alumni, influencers, wali santri, and pesantren administrators. Technique triangulation combined observation, interviews, and documentation. Time triangulation involved repeating data collection at different moments—before and after the santri registration period. Additionally, member checks were conducted by confirming findings with key informants to ensure that the data remained valid, credible, and consistent with the pesantren’s social reality. Through this methodology, the research aims to provide a comprehensive depiction of the strategies and impacts of religious social proof at Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Asy-Syafi’iyyah Darul Qur’an, North Kunder.

Table 1. Research Informants

No	Informant Code	Informant Category	Number	Sampling Technique	Focus of Information Explored
1	KY	Kyai/Pesantren Leader	1	Purposive	Religious legitimacy, da’wah strategy, and perspectives on social proof.
2	AL	Pesantren Alumni	3	Snowball	Success testimonials, influence of learning experiences in pesantren, and alumni roles in promotion.
3	SN	Active Santri (Students)	4	Purposive	Perceptions of pesantren promotion, identity pride, and peer responses.
4	WL	Parents of Santri	3	Random Sampling	Reasons for choosing pesantren, and the influence of

No	Informant Code	Informant Category	Number	Sampling Technique	Focus of Information Explored
					social proof in enrollment decisions.
5	PG	Pesantren Administrators	2	Purposive	Promotion management, experiences managing pesantren social media, and the impact of digital campaigns.

The composition of informants in this study was purposively designed to obtain rich and layered data related to the practice of religious social proof at Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Asy-Syafi'iyah Darul Qur'an, Kundur Utara. The kyai (KY), as the pesantren leader, was selected purposively due to his religious authority and strategic insight in legitimizing pesantren promotion through social media. Three alumni (AL) were chosen using the snowball technique, as their success narratives in society serve as concrete representations of pesantren educational quality and as credible testimonial instruments for the public. Four active santri (SN) were included to represent the younger generation's perceptions of pesantren promotion and how their identity is shaped in interaction with the digital world. Three parents of santri (WL) were randomly selected to capture family decision-making factors in choosing religious education for their children, including the influence of alumni and religious leaders. Lastly, two pesantren administrators (PG) were purposively selected for their direct involvement in managing social media and digital communication strategies. Through these varied categories and sampling techniques, the research successfully generated empirical data that is comprehensive, valid, and aligned with the study's objective to measure the impact of influencers and religious figures in pesantren educational marketing campaigns..

C. Results And Discussion

The Combination of Influencers and Kyai Expands Audience Reach

The social facts emerging from this study indicate that the combination of influencers and kyai in pesantren marketing campaigns through social media proved more effective in expanding audience reach than using either party alone (Halimah et al., 2024; Musaddad, 2024). Influencers successfully convey messages to younger audiences using popular styles and creative visuals, while kyai provide moral legitimacy and religious authority that strengthen public trust. The effectiveness of this synergy lies in the balance between popularity and credibility, as digital audiences seek both entertainment and spiritual direction (Sheldon, 2023; Zijderveld, 2023; Taylor, 2024). Empirical evidence shows increased engagement rates—likes, comments, and shares—particularly when kyai's short sermons were re-shared by influencers using relatable, youthful language. This collaboration demonstrates pesantren's social adaptation to the digital era, simultaneously enhancing visibility and maintaining the authenticity of religious values (Maulana, 2024; Masuwd et al., 2025; Saad, 2024).

“When my sermons are uploaded by the pesantren management, usually only parents watch them. But when influencers share them using youth-friendly language, the views increase significantly—even from outside regions. This proves that the style of delivery determines the breadth of dakwah.” (KY)

“We feel proud when our pesantren becomes more well-known. When our teacher appears on social media with influencers, my friends outside the pesantren become interested. They realize that studying in a pesantren isn't old-fashioned.” (SN)

These testimonies confirm that the collaboration between kyai and influencers effectively broadens the digital audience while fostering pride and renewed identity among santri.



Figure 1. Increase in New Santri Enrollment in 2025

The photo above captures the moment of new student registration at the pesantren, serving as concrete evidence of the growing public trust in faith-based educational institutions. This phenomenon cannot be separated from the role of religious social proof, where testimonials from kyai, alumni, and Muslim influencers who present the positive image of pesantren on social media collectively build a credible religious reputation. The prospective students appear enthusiastic and orderly in filling out registration forms, indicating that their decision to join is not merely driven by personal motivation, but also by the social and religious legitimacy that has been cultivated in the public sphere. This documentation reinforces the notion that recommendations from religious leaders and alumni possess greater persuasive power than formal promotional efforts. In conclusion, the practice of religious social proof not only expands the reach of information but also concretely drives the increase in new student enrollment, as reflected in the

administrative activities captured in the image.

Alumni Testimonials as Religious Social Proof

The social facts revealed in this study show that alumni testimonials play a strategic role as religious social proof that strengthens public trust in pesantren (Yanti et al., 2024; Romadlon, 2023). Significantly, alumni who have succeeded as academics, preachers, bureaucrats, or entrepreneurs serve as tangible representations of pesantren's educational quality. In Indonesia's socio-religious culture, personal success is often associated with one's educational background and adherence to religious values. Thus, when alumni state that the discipline, learning ethos, and moral values acquired from pesantren became the foundation of their success, their narratives act as a more convincing form of social legitimacy than institutional advertisements.

Empirical evidence shows that pesantren consistently featuring alumni testimonials through social media, admission brochures, and public speaking events experience significant increases in new student enrollment. Alumni success stories also have a motivational impact on active santri, fostering pride and a desire to follow in their predecessors' footsteps (Creapeau & Johs-Artisensi, 2023). In conclusion, alumni testimonials function not only as a promotional instrument but also as a cultural tool that builds collective trust, strengthens pesantren's image as a relevant Islamic educational institution, and reaffirms its position amid competition with modern educational establishments.



Figure 2. Alumni Delivering a Testimonial to Parents and the Community

The photo above depicts a solemn atmosphere as a pesantren alumnus delivers a testimonial speech before parents and community members. Standing on the podium with confidence and humility, the alumnus shares his educational journey at the pesantren and the positive impacts it has had on his personal and professional life. The attentive audience—including students, parents, and community members—illustrates the high level of public trust and acceptance toward alumni figures as living representations of pesantren's educational success.

This scene exemplifies the practice of religious social proof, where social legitimacy is built through personal experiences conveyed by individuals possessing moral authority and emotional closeness to the community. Alumni testimonials not only reinforce the pesantren's image as a relevant educational institution in the modern era but also serve as a driving factor in increasing parents' confidence to enroll their children (Efendy et al., 2023; Mufidah et al., 2025; Badrun, 2024). Therefore, this documentation serves as important evidence that alumni testimonials function as strategic instruments for expanding pesantren's influence while preserving the continuity of deeply rooted Islamic educational traditions within society..

D. Conclusion

Based on the findings presented, it can be concluded that religious social proof—through the combined roles of influencers, kyai, and alumni—has a significant impact on pesantren's educational marketing strategies in the era of social media. Influencers effectively bridge da'wah

messages using popular styles, creative visuals, and language that resonates with the younger generation, while kyai provide moral authority and religious legitimacy that strengthen public trust. Alumni, on the other hand, serve as living evidence of pesantren's educational success and act as social representations of Islamic excellence.

Social evidence shows that the collaboration of these three actors not only expands audience reach but also strengthens collective trust, directly contributing to the rise in new student enrollment. Field interviews and documentation confirm that society increasingly views pesantren as relevant, modern, and firmly rooted in Islamic values. Therefore, the research objective—to measure the impact of influencers and religious figures in pesantren marketing campaigns—has been successfully achieved. The study demonstrates that religious social proof serves as a strategic instrument capable of enhancing institutional image, expanding outreach, and increasing pesantren competitiveness amidst the digital globalization era.

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