



Building and Protecting Institutional Reputation through Communication and Media Relations: A Case Study of an Modern Islamic Boarding School

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ABSTRACT

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, a leading Islamic boarding school in Indonesia, faced a major reputational crisis in August 2022 after the death of a fifth-year student during a Perkajum scouting activity. Delayed and limited transparency with the victim's family fueled public suspicion and viral media coverage. This study analyzes Gontor's Public Relations strategies in managing public perception, using a qualitative case study through interviews, media analysis, and observation. The school adopted gradual openness via internal channels like Gontor TV and external media, but the slow initial response intensified negative sentiment. Media efforts included press releases, conferences, and social media use. Findings highlight the need for transparent, timely, and culturally sensitive communication to protect reputation in faith-based institutions

INTRODUCTION

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, established in 1926 in Ponorogo, East Java, is widely recognized as one of the largest and most influential modern Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. With a vision to cultivate young generations of noble character, broad intellectual horizons, and strong leadership capabilities, Gontor has developed an integrated educational system encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal learning. One of its distinctive features is its emphasis on character education and leadership development through various activities, including scouting. At Gontor, scouting is not merely a means of developing technical skills but also serves as a medium for fostering discipline, independence, cooperation, and leadership mentality. Over the decades, this activity has become an integral part of the santri's educational process and has brought Gontor recognition at both national and international levels through various achievements.

However, in August 2022, Gontor faced a serious crisis that tested its communication management capacity. The tragic death of a fifth-year student during the Thursday-Friday Camping (Thursday-Friday Camping, or Perkajum) activity triggered intense public attention. Allegations of violence during the activity, coupled with delayed and limited transparency of information provided to the victim's family, fueled widespread suspicion and distrust. The situation escalated when the victim's family engaged a prominent lawyer, and the case went viral across multiple social media platforms, receiving extensive coverage from national media outlets. Within days, Gontor's reputation built over nearly a century was severely shaken, public opinion developed rapidly and uncontrollably, and social pressure on the pesantren increased significantly.

This phenomenon reflects the major challenges faced by educational institutions particularly pesantren in an era of information openness and rapid digital communication flows. On the one hand, pesantren have strong internal cultural norms, often prioritizing internal deliberations before conveying information to the public. On the other hand, the logic of modern media demands speed, transparency, and narrative consistency. An imbalance between these approaches can lead to a communication crisis that exacerbates the underlying substantive crisis. In the academic context, research on crisis communication in Islamic educational institutions particularly those involving sensitive issues such as the death of a student due to alleged violence remains limited. Most previous studies have focused on corporations or public institutions, making the pesantren context a significant area for scholarly contribution, both theoretically and practically.

This research holds scientific significance as it examines in depth the crisis communication strategies and media relations management employed by the Public Relations division of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor in addressing a complex reputational crisis. Its theoretical contribution lies in enriching the literature on crisis communication within value-based educational settings, as well as in adapting crisis communication models that account for pesantren organizational culture. In terms of novelty, this study highlights the dual role of pesantren public relations as both internal and external information managers and as mediators between the interests of the organization, the victim's family, the media, and the wider public. Practically, the findings are expected to provide concrete recommendations for other Islamic educational institutions in designing crisis communication systems that are responsive, transparent, and adaptive to the dynamics of modern media, thereby minimizing reputational damage and maintaining public trust.

Based on this background, the present study focuses on analyzing the crisis communication strategies and media relations management undertaken by the Public Relations division of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor in handling a scouting-related educational incident that culminated in a reputational crisis. Through this approach, the research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice in crisis communication within pesantren-based educational environments and to serve as a reference for developing more effective communication policies in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, offers a systematic framework to understand how organizations should respond to crises based on public perceptions of the organization's responsibility (Coombs, 2007). SCCT posits that not all crises have equal reputational impact because the public assigns different levels of responsibility depending on the type of crisis.

According to SCCT, crises are categorized into three primary clusters based on the attributed responsibility:

Victim Cluster : where the organization is perceived as a victim of the crisis, such as natural disasters or third-party actions beyond the organization's control. In this cluster, the organization's responsibility is minimal or nonexistent.

Accidental Cluster : where the organization is perceived to have unintentionally caused the crisis, such as procedural errors or technical accidents. The attributed responsibility is moderate since negligence, albeit unintentional, is involved.

Preventable Cluster : where the crisis is perceived as resulting from intentional or preventable actions or omissions by the organization, assigning high responsibility to the organization.

The SCCT application process begins with identifying the appropriate crisis cluster through contextual and factual analysis. Subsequently, organizations must assess exacerbating factors such as crisis history and prior reputation, which may intensify negative public perceptions and amplify the crisis impact (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

In the case of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, the crisis triggered by the death of a student due to violence during scouting activities clearly falls into the preventable cluster. This is because the public and the victim's family perceive the incident as avoidable with better supervision and handling by the institution. Consequently, the level of attributed responsibility to Pondok Gontor is high. This public assessment is further reinforced by the initial response of the institution, which was perceived as slow and lacking transparency, creating an information vacuum that fueled negative speculation in social media and the broader community. These factors constitute crisis history and prior reputation elements that indirectly exacerbate the crisis effects.

According to SCCT principles, when an organization faces a crisis with high attributed responsibility, the most appropriate communication strategy is the rebuild strategy. This strategy requires the organization to proactively acknowledge fault openly, issue sincere apologies to the public and affected families, provide honest clarifications about the incident, and implement concrete corrective actions to prevent recurrence. Implementing the rebuild strategy must be accompanied by transparent and consistent communication to restore the shaken public trust. This strategy functions not only to repair the institution's image but also as a moral and social responsibility toward the victims and their families.

In the context of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, recommended concrete measures include strengthening supervision in scouting activities, providing intensive training for supervisors and staff, and enhancing reporting and handling mechanisms for violence incidents promptly and adequately. These steps are critical not only for responding to the existing crisis but also for future crisis mitigation. By consistently and sustainably applying the rebuild strategy, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor can rehabilitate its reputation, reinforce public trust, and ensure that the educational and scouting values are carried out safely and with dignity.

Image Restoration Theory (IRT)

Image Restoration Theory (IRT), developed by William L. Benoit, is a significant crisis communication theory that explains how organizations can repair their image and reputation after facing attacks or reputational crises. The theory is based on the assumption that reputational threats arise when the public perceives offensive actions by the organization and assigns responsibility to it (Benoit, 1995).

Benoit identifies five primary strategies for image repair: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997). Each strategy is selected based on the crisis context, the severity of the issue, and public perception of the organization.

In the context of the crisis experienced by Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, which stems from the death of a student due to violence during scouting activities, the most relevant and effective strategies are a combination of mortification and corrective action. This is because the crisis involves a high attribution of responsibility from the public, necessitating that the organization acknowledge its fault and undertake tangible efforts to rectify the conditions that led to the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

The mortification strategy involves openly admitting fault and offering sincere apologies to the victims and the broader community (Benoit, 1995). Crisis communication research highlights mortification as a crucial initial step to diffuse public anger and demonstrate that the organization is responsible and compassionate (Hearit, 2006). Without this admission, image repair efforts may face obstacles as the public may perceive the organization as dishonest or indifferent to justice.

Meanwhile, corrective action requires the organization to implement concrete preventive and remedial measures to ensure that similar crises do not recur (Benoit, 1997). In Gontor's case, such actions could include strengthening governance of scouting activities, enhancing training for supervisors, and establishing more effective reporting and oversight mechanisms. This aligns with Coombs' (2007) findings that tangible actions have a far greater impact on restoring public trust than mere verbal statements.

The simultaneous application of these two strategies reinforces the message of image restoration and signals Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor's serious commitment to addressing the crisis. Benoit (2015) further asserts that combining mortification and corrective action represents the most effective response in crises characterized by high responsibility attribution, especially those involving loss of life and safety.

Moreover, implementing IRT-based image restoration strategies must be supported by transparent and consistent communication with the public, including victims' families and the educational community. Open communication can reduce negative speculation and enhance organizational legitimacy (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Overall, the application of Image Restoration Theory through acknowledgment of fault and concrete corrective actions is not merely a rhetorical step but an organizational transformation process aimed at restoring trust and rebuilding relationships with the public in a sustainable manner.

Media Relations

Media relations is a key function within Public Relations that focuses on building and maintaining positive relationships between organizations and mass media. In crisis contexts, media relations play a strategic role as an effective communication bridge between the institution and the public through media as the primary information channel (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Wilcox et al., 2015). Media relations activities include press releases, press conferences, press visits, press receptions, event coverage, media releases, and press interviews, all aimed at ensuring information is delivered credibly, swiftly, and transparently (Coombs, 2012).

In the crisis experienced by Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, media relations management is crucial to controlling the public narrative. The crisis involving the death of a student due to violence during scouting activities attracted widespread public and media attention. In such situations, inefficiency or an information vacuum can quickly spark speculation, rumors, and negative media coverage that damage the institution's reputation (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2016).

Effective media relations strategy demands the delivery of information that is timely, consistent, and open. For example, regularly held press conferences provide the institution with opportunities to clarify facts, respond to journalists' questions, and announce crisis management measures. Additionally, well-structured press releases and widely distributed media releases serve as formal channels to communicate key messages intended by the organization (Wilcox et al., 2015). Press visits and event coverage can also demonstrate the institution's commitment to addressing the issue and transparency in the process (Fearn-Banks, 2016).

Effective management of media relations not only functions as narrative control but also as a crisis impact mitigation tool by reducing public uncertainty and strengthening trust through transparency and openness (Coombs, 2007). In the long term, this contributes to the restoration of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor's image and reputation, as well as maintaining good relationships with stakeholders and the educational community.

Previous research indicates that institutions capable of building good media relationships during crises have greater opportunities to manage public opinion positively and minimize reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Therefore, well-planned and organized media relations management is an integral part of a comprehensive crisis communication strategy.

Thus, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor needs to optimize media relations functions as a strategic effort in facing this crisis, ensuring that information conveyed is accurate, trustworthy, and meets the public's need for transparency and accountability.

Corporate Apologia

Corporate Apologia is a communication approach utilized by organizations to defend themselves when facing public attack or criticism. This concept was notably developed by Ware and Linkugel (1973), who identified four primary strategies within corporate apologia: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. These strategies aim to reshape public perception and maintain organizational legitimacy amidst crisis. Three strategies particularly relevant to the crisis experienced by Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor are differentiation, transcendence, and bolstering. The differentiation strategy functions to separate or distinguish the organization's actions from the negative context surrounding the incident. In other words, the organization seeks to demonstrate that, despite the adverse event, its actions do not wholly reflect the institution's values or intentions (Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Benoit, 1995).

The transcendence strategy helps the organization situate the crisis event within a broader and more meaningful context. This strategy attempts to shift the public focus from the negative aspects of the incident toward the higher values or overarching goals upheld by the organization, such as commitment to education, character development, and the safety of students (Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Hearit, 2006). The bolstering strategy involves reminding the public of the organization's past positive actions, accomplishments, or good intentions to reinforce its credibility and moral standing (Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Benoit, 1995). In Gontor's case, this could mean highlighting the institution's longstanding commitment to fostering discipline, education, and moral development within its student body, thereby contextualizing the incident as an aberration rather than a norm.

In the case of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, the application of differentiation could involve clarifying that the violence inflicted upon the student was not representative of the overall scouting practices within the institution, but rather an incidental occurrence requiring immediate corrective action. Transcendence can be employed to emphasize Gontor's steadfast commitment to providing a safe educational environment and fostering character building, framing the tragic event as a challenge prompting comprehensive institutional improvement. Bolstering would reinforce this narrative by underscoring the institution's history of positive contributions to student development (Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Coombs, 2007).

It is crucial that these strategies are applied carefully so as not to appear as evading responsibility. Rather, by combining contextual clarification through differentiation, highlighting higher purposes through transcendence, and reminding stakeholders of prior positive actions via bolstering, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor can reduce excessive public blame attribution while acknowledging accountability for the incident. This approach helps mitigate negative public perception and repair relations between the institution and the broader community (Benoit, 1997; Hearit, 2006).

Moreover, the appropriate use of Corporate Apologia also serves as a crisis mitigation tool that, when supported by transparent communication and concrete actions, enhances Gontor's credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Consistent and empathetic communication reinforces the message that the institution is not only accountable but also committed to learning and growing from this crisis.

Overall, the implementation of differentiation, transcendence, and bolstering strategies within Corporate Apologia enables Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor to effectively manage public perception, safeguard its reputation, and strengthen public trust over the long term.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a single instrumental case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth exploration of the crisis communication phenomenon occurring at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, specifically in handling the case of violence during scouting activities that resulted in the death of a student. The case study design enables the researcher to collect detailed data from multiple sources and analyze it thoroughly to understand the context, processes, and strategies used in managing the crisis.

The research population includes all parties directly and indirectly involved in the crisis communication management process at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling, selecting informants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Key informants include the Gontor Public Relations officer and the Spokesperson appointed by the institution's leadership, who are the primary parties responsible for developing and delivering crisis communication strategies. Primary informants consist of the Head of Student Care, the Scouting Coordinator, and the Musyrif (multimedia supervisor) directly involved in information management during the crisis. Additional informants include Public Relations staff, Multimedia staff, Gontor TV staff, and the Secretary to the Leadership, who assisted in operational communication during the crisis. Supporting sources include the Chairperson of the Public Relations Review Team, who played a role in evaluating communication strategies. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with key, primary, and additional informants. Literature review was conducted to reinforce the theoretical framework and to compare the research findings with previous studies. Documentation analysis included online news reports, social media posts, and internal archives related to the case.

Through this methodology, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive and in-depth depiction of the crisis communication strategies implemented by Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor in addressing a case with significant impact on the institution's reputation

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, encompassing the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation utilizing multiple sources and methodological triangulation employing various data collection techniques were applied. This approach enhanced the credibility and accuracy of the information by capturing diverse perspectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illustrate that the death of a fifth-year student during the Perkajum scouting activity in Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) evolved into a multi-dimensional institutional crisis with a high attribution of responsibility from the public. This perception was shaped not only by the incident itself but also by the institution's initial communication approach, which was perceived as lacking in transparency.

Crisis Categorization and Escalation Patterns

Evidence from interviews, media archives, and observation indicates that the crisis falls into Coombs' intentional cluster, where organizational actions (or inactions) are perceived as preventable. The crisis escalated rapidly from an internal disciplinary matter to a national public issue due to three interrelated dynamics:

1. Information vacuum during the critical early hours post-incident;
2. Amplification by high-profile actors specifically, lawyer Hotman Paris who mobilized public sentiment;
3. Viral media circulation that reframed the issue from an isolated disciplinary breach to a systemic institutional failure.

The escalation trajectory followed a "trigger amplifier cascade" pattern: the trigger being the undisclosed cause of death, the amplifier being the public legal intervention, and the cascade being the replication of the narrative across mainstream and social media channels.

Pre-Crisis Stage: Detection, Prevention, and Preparation Gaps

Signal detection was activated promptly by the PR unit through continuous social media monitoring, identifying the viral Instagram post as a potential threat. Data triangulation confirmed that the institution recognized the risk early. Prevention measures included establishing a Crisis Evaluation Team composed of PR, student affairs, legal advisors, media content managers, and experienced alumni. These measures allowed for systematic data validation and narrative mapping. Preparation was partially fulfilled. A crisis task force (Crisis Management Team) was formed, and two spokespersons were informally appointed. However, there was no formal Crisis Management Plan (CMP) or written Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). This procedural absence forced reliance on situational judgment and institutional culture rather than pre-defined protocols, increasing the risk of inconsistent decision-making and message delivery.

Crisis Stage: Response Speed, Consistency, and Openness

The first official public response was issued one day after the viral escalation. Actions included condolence statements, funeral prayers, press conferences, press releases, and the symbolic release of the “I’tiraf” music video acknowledging shortcomings in discipline enforcement. Speed of response was rated as reactive rather than proactive. The delay allowed alternative narratives to dominate, reinforcing the perception of institutional avoidance. Message consistency was maintained across channels, with synchronized narratives emphasizing condolences, responsibility acknowledgment, rejection of violence, and procedural cooperation with law enforcement. Cross-verification of media statements and official releases confirmed high message discipline among spokespersons.

Openness was reflected in media accessibility: journalists were granted direct interaction with crisis task force members and relevant units. This facilitated factual accuracy in reporting, although the absence of a real-time update mechanism in the initial 24 hours weakened narrative control.

Crisis Response Strategies and Alignment with SCCT

Three SCCT-aligned strategies were identified:

- Apology: personal visits and formal apologies to the victim’s family.
- Compensation: provision of full educational support for surviving family members.
- Bolstering: publicizing institutional reforms and cultural reaffirmations via media content.

Additional strategies included explicit acceptance of moral and operational responsibility and active collaboration with police investigations. Despite these, the early-stage misclassification of the crisis type constrained the strategic fit, indicating the need for a formalized crisis typology assessment in future incidents.

Post-Crisis Stage: Continuity without Formal Evaluation

No institution-wide formal evaluation was conducted post-crisis, representing a missed opportunity for organizational learning. Informal assessments were conducted during the crisis, and post-crisis actions focused on sustaining goodwill with the victim’s family and continued issue monitoring to detect potential narrative resurgence.

The social responsibility initiative financial aid and education sponsorship served dual purposes: moral restitution and strategic relationship maintenance. Yet, without documented lessons learned, structural vulnerability to similar crises remains unaddressed.

Media Relations and Social Media Performance

Media relations during the crisis were strong: timely press releases, rapid post-press conference dissemination, and high transparency with reporters. Media statements were consistent, focused on core messages, and aligned with ethical commitments. These practices met the operational standards of crisis-era media management as outlined by Kriyantono (2012) and Coombs (2007).

Conversely, social media performance exhibited latency in early crisis hours, failing to capitalize on first-mover advantage. Delays in disseminating verified narratives ceded control to unofficial sources, leading to speculation. Social media monitoring was active, but reactive adjustments could not fully counteract early narrative dominance by external actors. The combined analysis reveals a dichotomy: traditional media engagement was strategic and effective, whereas social media utilization lacked the speed and structural agility required for modern crisis environments.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends the application of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Image Restoration Theory (IRT) to the context of value-based educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Previous SCCT research has predominantly focused on corporations or non-religious public institutions, whereas this study demonstrates that SCCT principles particularly the rebuild strategy can be adapted to account for cultural norms, organizational structures, and the moral expectations of the public in a pesantren setting.

The findings also reinforce the relevance of mortification and corrective action strategies from IRT in cases of crises with high attribution of responsibility. The combination of sincere acknowledgment of wrongdoing and concrete corrective measures was found to be more effective in restoring reputation than verbal statements alone. This offers a theoretical contribution to crisis communication literature by integrating moral, cultural, and structural considerations into reputation management for faith-based educational institutions.

Practical Implications

This study highlights the importance for educational institutions, particularly pesantren, to strengthen preparedness through the development of a formal Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure a rapid, coordinated response. A quick and transparent initial statement, even with limited information, followed by consistent updates, is essential to reduce speculation and misinformation. Maintaining strong and ongoing relationships with the media supports accurate and consistent coverage during crises, while effective use of social media as a primary communication channel managed by a dedicated and trained team helps

secure narrative control in the early stages. Finally, conducting structured post-crisis evaluations ensures that lessons learned are documented and integrated into improved future crisis response strategies

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the crisis experienced by Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) in August 2022, triggered by the death of a student during the Perkajum scouting activity, falls into the preventable cluster category according to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The high level of public attribution of responsibility was exacerbated by delays in the initial response and limited transparency, creating a narrative vacuum that was subsequently filled by external actors through mass media and social media.

The communication strategies employed included public apology, provision of compensation, bolstering, and active collaboration with the media. While relations with traditional media proved effective in controlling news coverage, the predominantly reactive approach, absence of a formal Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), as well as delays in social media management, weakened narrative control during the early stages of the crisis. Furthermore, the absence of a formal post-crisis evaluation indicated missed opportunities for organizational learning and improvement.

Drawing from the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen crisis preparedness and communication effectiveness in pesantren environments, particularly at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor:

1. Development of a Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and Crisis SOPs

Formulate formal documents outlining standardized crisis-handling procedures to ensure a rapid, coordinated, and consistent institutional response.

2. Implementation of Rapid and Transparent Initial Responses

Issue official statements promptly, even with limited information, followed by regular updates to minimize speculation and misinformation.

3. Optimization of Social Media Management

Establish a dedicated, professionally trained social media team to maintain narrative dominance from the onset of the crisis and counterbalance external narratives.

4. Strengthening Relations with Mass Media

Maintain proactive communication through press releases, press conferences, and direct journalist access to ensure accurate reporting aligned with the institution's messaging.

5. Conducting Structured Post-Crisis Evaluations

Undertake formal analysis of all crisis management stages to document lessons learned and integrate them into future policies and procedures.

6. Enhancement of Supervision and Prevention Systems

Strengthen supervision of student activities, provide intensive training for supervisors, and improve mechanisms for prompt reporting and handling of violence-related incidents

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