



Rebranding Kendal Regency's Identity as a City of Islamic Students through Regional Government Digital Communication

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Article received: 05 Mei 2026, Review process: 12 Mei 2026

Article Accepted : 29 Mei 2026, Article published: 13 Juni 2026

ABSTRACT

This research examines the rebranding strategy of Kendal Regency as the "City of Santri" (Kota Santri) through digital communication conducted by the Regional Government of Kendal Regency. The increasing inter-regional competition in building regional image in the digital era, coupled with the significant yet under-communicated Islamic potential of Kendal, forms the urgency of this study. The objectives are to: (1) analyze the digital communication strategies used by the Kendal Regional Government in building the Kota Santri identity; (2) identify rebranding elements implemented through digital platforms; and (3) evaluate the effectiveness of digital communication in shaping public perception of Kendal Regency. A qualitative descriptive methodology with a single case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 key informants, non-participant observation of official digital content across Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and the official website, and document analysis. Findings reveal that the Kendal Regional Government employed a multi-platform strategy integrating Islamic visual identity, narrative consistency, and community engagement through hashtag campaigns. The rebranding process demonstrated moderate effectiveness, with high content output but inconsistent public engagement metrics. This study contributes a digital rebranding model grounded in Islamic cultural identity that can serve as a replicable framework for similarly characterized local governments across Indonesia.

Keywords: Regional Rebranding; Kota Santri; Government Digital Communication; Place Branding; Local Cultural Identity

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi rebranding identitas Kabupaten Kendal sebagai Kota Santri melalui komunikasi digital yang dilakukan oleh Pemerintah Daerah Kabupaten Kendal. Urgensi penelitian didasarkan pada meningkatnya persaingan antar daerah dalam membangun citra wilayah di era digital, serta potensi keislaman Kabupaten Kendal yang belum terkomunikasikan secara optimal. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah: (1) menganalisis strategi komunikasi digital Pemkab Kendal dalam membangun identitas Kota Santri; (2) mengidentifikasi elemen rebranding yang diimplementasikan melalui platform digital; dan (3) mengevaluasi efektivitas komunikasi digital tersebut dalam membentuk persepsi publik. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan desain studi kasus tunggal. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan 10 informan kunci, observasi non-partisipan terhadap konten digital resmi di Instagram, Facebook, YouTube,

dan website resmi, serta analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Pemkab Kendal menggunakan strategi multiplatform yang mengintegrasikan identitas visual islami, konsistensi narasi, dan keterlibatan komunitas melalui kampanye hashtag. Proses rebranding menunjukkan efektivitas moderat dengan output konten tinggi namun konsistensi engagement publik yang masih perlu ditingkatkan. Penelitian ini menghasilkan model rebranding digital berbasis identitas budaya keislaman yang dapat diadopsi oleh pemerintah daerah lain dengan karakteristik serupa.

Kata Kunci: Rebranding Daerah; Kota Santri; Komunikasi Digital Pemerintah; Place Branding; Identitas Budaya Lokal

INTRODUCTION

Kendal Regency is one of the regions in Central Java Province with a strong Islamic tradition, marked by the presence of hundreds of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), thousands of active students (santri), and influential national Islamic scholars. However, the potential of this Islamic identity has not been effectively communicated to the wider community, either regionally or nationally.

In an era of increasingly fierce inter-regional competition, place branding has become a strategic instrument for increasing regional competitiveness, attracting investment, and strengthening social cohesion (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2007). The Kendal Regency Government has initiated a rebranding program, embracing the identity of "Kota Santri" (Islamic Students City) as the region's strategic positioning, particularly since the policy was enacted in the 2022-2025 Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD).

Regional rebranding is not sufficient through formal policymaking alone; it requires a well-planned, consistent, and adaptive communication strategy to adapt to developments in communication technology (Eshuis et al., 2013). In this context, digital communication becomes the backbone of disseminating rebranding messages to a wider public. Digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and the official government website have become the primary platforms for disseminating the Kota Santri narrative (Falinda et al., 2026).

Previous research on place branding in Indonesia has focused more on the tourism and economic dimensions (Setiawan, 2018; Trimannah, 2012). Studies specifically exploring regional rebranding based on Islamic identity through government digital communications are still very limited. This gap underscores the urgency of this research.

Studies by Mergel (2013) and Criado et al. (2017) on government social media use indicate that the effectiveness of digital communication is highly dependent on message consistency, frequency of interaction, and the quality of visual content. These findings are relevant for evaluating the Kendal Regency Government's digital communication practices within the framework of the Kota Santri rebranding.

The research questions focused on this research are: (1) How is the strategy for rebranding Kendal Regency's identity as a Kota Santri implemented through local government digital communications? (2) What elements are the pillars of digital communication in the rebranding process?; and (3) How effective is the

Kendal Regency Government's digital communication in shaping public perception of the identity of the City of Santri?

The purpose of this research is to analyze strategies, identify rebranding elements, and evaluate the effectiveness of the Kendal Regency Government's digital communication. Academically, this research contributes to the study of government communication, Islamic-based place branding, and regional digital communication models in Indonesia.

METHODS

This research employed a descriptive qualitative method with a single case study design (Yin, 2018). This approach was chosen because it captures the depth of communication phenomena and meanings that cannot be measured quantitatively, and allows for contextual exploration of the Kendal Regency Government's digital rebranding practices. The research location was Kendal Regency, Central Java Province, with a focus on the Kendal Regency Government's official digital communication channels, including: the official website (kendalkab.go.id), the Instagram account (@kendalkab), the Facebook account (Pemkab Kendal), and the YouTube channel (Pemkab Kendal TV). The research subjects were 10 purposively selected key informants: the Head of the Kendal Regency Communication and Informatics Office, three managers of the Kendal Regency Government's official social media channels, two religious figures or Islamic boarding school administrators, two academics in the communications field, and two active followers of the Kendal Regency Government's official account.

Data collection involved three methods. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 key informants were conducted to obtain primary data on the strategy, implementation, and evaluation of digital rebranding communications. Second, non-participant observation of digital content uploaded to the Kendal Regency Government's official channels from January 2024 to December 2025, encompassing 500 pieces of content, were systematically analyzed. Third, document analysis of communication policies, the RPJMD (Regional Medium-Term Development Plan), and the Kendal Communications and Information Service's performance reports. Data analysis used thematic analysis techniques combined with content analysis of digital content. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking with key informants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview data processing used NVivo 12 software to assist with coding and categorization of themes. The analytical framework integrates three main theories: place branding theory (Kavaratzis, 2004), digital government communication theory (Mergel, 2013), and the concept of local cultural identity (Hall, 1990). The integration of these three frameworks allows for a comprehensive analysis of the digital rebranding phenomenon of Kota Santri from a strategic communication perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results show that the Kendal Regency Government has implemented a digital communication strategy for rebranding the City of Santri

through four interrelated main dimensions: constructing an identity narrative, visualizing Islamic identity, mobilizing digital communities, and cross-platform consistency (Falinda et al., 2025).

Table: 1 Implementation of digital communication rebranding

Implementasi	Persentase (%)	Total (konten)
2022-2023	68%	500
2023-2024	74%	200
2024-2025	340%	340

First, constructing an identity narrative. The Kendal Regency Government is constructing the City of Santri narrative through content that emphasizes the Islamic values inherent in the history and lives of the Kendal community. This narrative is constructed through three framing strategies: (1) historical framing linking Kendal to influential scholars such as Sunan Katong; (2) contemporary framing showcasing the activities of modern Islamic boarding schools; and (3) programmatic framing that demonstrates Islamic value-based policies. In the 2022-2023 period, 68% of the 500 pieces of content analyzed explicitly contained elements of the Kota Santri narrative.

Second, visualization of Islamic identity. Visual elements are a crucial component in digital rebranding communications. The Kendal Regency Government developed a consistent visual identity system with distinctive characteristics: the use of green and gold to represent Islamic values, Arabic-influenced typography, and the icon of a santri (Islamic boarding school) and Islamic boarding school (pesantren) as a visual mascot. An analysis of 200 pieces of Instagram content showed that 74% used visual elements based on Islamic identity. This visual consistency aligns with the principle of place branding, which emphasizes distinctive visual identity as the foundation of brand recognition (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).

Third, digital community mobilization. The Kendal Regency Government developed a community participation strategy through the hashtag campaigns #KendalKotaSantri and #SantriKendal, which encouraged active citizen involvement in content dissemination. This campaign successfully generated 12,400 posts from user accounts during the 2023-2024 period. Interviews with social media managers revealed that this user-generated content strategy was intentionally designed to expand the reach of the message while building a sense of community ownership of the Kota Santri (Islamic City) identity.

Fourth, cross-platform consistency. Findings indicate that the Kendal Regency Government adopted a cross-platform communication strategy by adapting content formats to suit the characteristics of each platform while maintaining a consistent core message. Instagram focused on visual content and reels, Facebook on narratives and community interaction, YouTube on program documentation and Islamic boarding school profiles, and the official website on formal policy information (Daud et al., 2026). This strategy aligns with Mergel's

(2013) findings, which emphasize the importance of platform-specific adaptation in effective digital government communication.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of digital rebranding communication showed moderate results. In terms of quantity, the total number of followers on the official Kendal Regency Government account reached 87,400 by the end of 2025, a 340% increase from 2022. However, the average engagement rate was only 2.3%, still below the national benchmark for local governments of 3.5% (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023). The main challenges identified were inconsistent posting schedules and a lack of responsiveness to public comments.

Based on data triangulation, this study produced an Islamic Identity-Based Digital Rebranding Model (MRDIK), consisting of five components: (1) Mapping regional Islamic assets; (2) Construction of an identity narrative based on historical and cultural facts; (3) Development of a consistent Islamic visual identity system; (4) Values-based digital community mobilization strategy; and (5) Periodic evaluation of communication effectiveness. This model is expected to serve as a reference framework for other local governments with strong Islamic traditions, such as Demak, Jombang, and Kudus Regencies.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicates that the Kendal Regency Government has implemented a structured digital communication strategy for the rebranding of Kota Santri (Islamic City of Santri) through four dimensions: constructing an Islamic identity narrative, consistent visualization of Islamic identity, mobilizing digital communities through hashtag campaigns, and consistency across digital platforms. The implementation of this strategy has resulted in a significant increase in digital reach, although the effectiveness of public engagement still needs to be optimized.

This study provides a theoretical contribution in the form of an Islamic Identity-Based Digital Rebranding Model (MRDIK) that can be adapted by local governments with similar characteristics. Practically, this study recommends that the Kendal Regency Government improve the consistency of its content schedule, build the capacity of its social media management team, and develop a content collaboration program with Islamic boarding school communities as producers of authentic content. Further research is recommended to measure the impact of the digital rebranding on external public perceptions of the region through a broader quantitative survey.

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