



Constructing Islamic Preacher Personal Branding via Digital Public Relations Strategies on Instagram and TikTok: A Comparative Case Study of Gus Kautsar

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Abstract

The dissemination of Islam in Indonesia is undergoing a paradigm shift in which a preacher's image is constructed in a decentralized manner through social media, with public relations (PR) operating not top-down from official management but through organic fan participation. This study maps and compares content strategies on Instagram and TikTok in constructing the personal branding of Gus Kautsar as an authentic, humble preacher close to Millennials and Generation Z. Employing a qualitative comparative case study design, it analyzes the 120 most popular content pieces from major fan-page accounts between January 2024 and March 2026, using thematic reduction with the eight laws of personal branding (Montoya, 2002) as the primary framework, supported by the Share/Optimize/Manage/Engage digital PR model (Luttrell, 2018) and a parasocial intimacy strategy matrix for millennial preachers. The findings reveal a complementary synergy between the two platforms that forms an audience engagement funnel: TikTok dominates the top-funnel awareness function through short, humorous clips, distinctive linguistic accents, and high virality, while Instagram assumes the mid-to-bottom funnel role, facilitating the depth of dawuh (teachings) narratives, visual aesthetics, and contemplative community interaction. Gus Kautsar's branding is thus constructed cohesively through an organic, polycentric PR ecosystem without his official account, with message authenticity and emotional resonance as the primary catalysts mobilizing fans as active distribution agents. The study contributes to digital PR literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of organic earned media in syiar practices and offering a hybrid strategic framework for preachers and Islamic institutions navigating the algorithmic ecosystem.

Keywords: Public Relations Digital; Dakwah Digital; Instagram; Tiktok; Gus Kautsar

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, social media has radically transformed how individuals communicate, interact, and express their religious faith. In Indonesia, this paradigm shift is particularly evident within the contemporary landscape of Islamic preaching. Today, a preacher's authority is no longer established and recognized solely through physical presence at mosque pulpits or traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Instead, public recognition is now largely—and often predominantly—shaped through fragmented content distributed across visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This phenomenon carries sociological implications that extend far beyond the mere expansion of audience reach. The transition into algorithmic spaces fundamentally redefines the mechanisms by which a religious figure's image and authority are constructed, managed, negotiated, and ultimately perceived by an increasingly heterogeneous digital public.¹

The concept of personal branding, historically associated almost exclusively with business and commercial entertainment, has evolved into a crucial dimension of modern religious communication. A preacher's capacity to project a consistent, authentic, and culturally relevant persona within the digital sphere directly impacts the public's reception and resonance of their theological message. As articulated by Montoya (2002), the construction of a public identity relies on eight fundamental laws of personal branding: specialization, thought leadership, authentic personality, uniqueness, visibility, message consistency, persistence, and goodwill. In the contemporary context, all these elements must no longer be merely spoken but dynamically expressed and translated through the art of visual and digital storytelling.²

Gus Kautsar, whose full name is KH. Muhammad Abdurrahman Al Kautsar was born on November 22, 1985, in Ploso Village, Kediri, East Java. He is the second son of KH. Nurul Huda Djazuli and Hj. Lailatul Badriyah Djazuli, leader of Al Falah Islamic Boarding School in Ploso. Raised within the *pesantren* community, Gus Kautsar received intensive religious education under his father's direct guidance.³ Currently, he holds strategic leadership roles as the director and head of a sub-campus at Al Falah Ploso and as the head of the Ta'lim Assembly Teras Gubuk. The most fascinating paradox of his public persona lies in his digital footprint. Although he consciously maintains no official personal social media accounts, the reach of his *da'wah* is massively amplified. His messages are disseminated through a decentralized PR ecosystem driven by the Digital Documentation Team and hundreds of organic fan pages across Instagram and TikTok. Through a synthesis of a straightforward communication style, profound theological insights, and relatable everyday vernacular, Gus Kautsar has established himself as an influential young cleric capable of bridging classical *pesantren* traditions and the sociological landscape of Millennial and Gen Z audiences.⁴

This phenomenon exposes a significant conceptual shift: digital public relations in the contemporary landscape of Islamic preaching no longer relies strictly on rigid, top-down planning and centralized execution. Rather than being orchestrated by a formal management team, this PR ecosystem flourishes organically, driven by decentralized initiatives from fan

¹ Regina Luttrell, *Social Media: How to Engage, Share, and Connect* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2025).

² Peter Montoya and Tim Vandehey, *The Personal Branding Phenomenon: Realize Greater Influence, Explosive Income Growth and Rapid Career Advancement by Applying the Branding Techniques of Michael, Martha & Oprah* (Peter Montoya, 2002).

³ Muhamad Basyrul Muvid, Didiet Anindita Arnandy, and Achmad Arrosyidi, "TikTok Social Media: A Breakthrough to the Moderation in Da'wah Education," *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 16, no. 2 (2024): 1193–1204.

⁴ John Thomas MacTaggart, *Communicating to Gen Z: Stylistic Adaptation in Preaching From an Historical and Biblical Perspective With Application to Generations Studies* (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023).

communities that voluntarily curate, distribute, and amplify the religious figure's public image. This participatory distribution mechanism is best understood through the lens of parasocial intimacy. As articulated by Famuji et al. (2025) in their study on the parasocial communication dynamics of millennial preachers, the subjective emotional proximity forged between the audience and the *da'i*-even in the absence of symmetrical, two-way interaction-serves as the ultimate catalyst. It is this psychological bond that effectively becomes the primary engine driving fans to actively share content and elevate engagement metrics across various social media platforms.⁵

However, most existing research remains largely descriptive or focuses on a single platform. While Famuji et al. (2025) examined parasocial intimacy strategies on Instagram and TikTok, they did not connect these findings in depth to personal branding and digital public relations for a specific figure such as Gus Kautsar.⁶ Meanwhile, Mashudi's (2025) study addresses microcelebrity transformation in general terms, without offering a systematic comparison of platforms. This gap is what the present research seeks to address.⁷

The central question is: how do content strategies and digital public relations on Instagram and TikTok comparatively construct Gus Kautsar's personal branding as an Islamic preacher? The research pursues three specific aims.⁸ First, it identifies the differences in content strategies between Instagram and TikTok in disseminating Gus Kautsar's preaching message. Second, it analyzes how personal branding construction occurs through organic digital activity. Third, it offers practical recommendations for other preachers seeking to leverage social media more strategically.

This research is expected to offer dual contributions. Academically, it enriches contemporary Islamic communication studies by integrating three theoretical frameworks into a single comparative analysis: Montoya's (2002) personal branding laws as the primary lens, complemented by digital PR (Luttrell, 2018) and parasocial communication (Famuji et al., 2025) as supporting frameworks. In practice, its findings can serve as guidance for preachers, Islamic institutions, and government bodies in designing religious communication strategies that better respond to digital audiences' behavior.

At its core, personal branding is a strategic process for creating and maintaining a consistent, unique perception in the public mind (Montoya, 2002). As the primary theoretical anchor of this study, Montoya identifies eight foundational laws of effective personal branding.⁹ First, specialization-a personal brand must focus on a single, clear area of expertise or niche. Second, thought leadership-it must be recognized as an authority in its field. Third, authentic personality-successful brands always root themselves in a person's genuine character, not artificial construction. Fourth, uniqueness-there is something that sets it apart from others. Fifth, visibility-it must remain consistently present and visible to the public. Sixth, message unity-all aspects of communication must reinforce and align with each other. Seventh,

⁵ Untung Famuji and Khusnul Khotimah, "Optimalisasi Feed Instagram Sebagai Media Dakwah: Studi Kasus Akun @QuranReview Dalam Meningkatkan Pemahaman Al-Qur'an Melalui Platform Broadcasting Digital," *An-Nida: Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 17, no. 2 (2025): 173–82.

⁶ Untung Famuji et al., "Shifting Religious Authority in the AI Era: A Comparative Study of Gen Z Trust in AI Guidance and Traditional Ulama," *Wasilatuna: Jurnal Komunikasi Dan Penyiaran Islam* 9, no. 1 (2026): 82–92.

⁷ Bethany Usher, "Rethinking Microcelebrity: Key Points in Practice, Performance and Purpose," *Celebrity Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 171–88.

⁸ Fikri Faisal, Akbar Khalid, and Hana Azzahra, "Analysis of the Framing of Islamic Preaching Messages in Ustadz Muda's TikTok Islamic Preaching Content," *Journal on Islamic Studies* 1, no. 4 (2025): 221–33.

⁹ Montoya and Vandehey, *The Personal Branding Phenomenon: Realize Greater Influence, Explosive Income Growth and Rapid Career Advancement by Applying the Branding Techniques of Michael, Martha & Oprah*.

persistence—a brand does not fluctuate with momentary trends. Eighth, good intentions and positive values underpin all its activities.¹⁰

In Islamic preaching contexts, applying personal branding is far from straightforward. On the one hand, it helps preachers strengthen their religious authority and expand their message reach. On the other hand, there is the risk that efforts to build a public image conflict with the sincerity that lies at the heart of preaching itself. Hidayah (2024), in her study of Habib Husein Ja'far on YouTube, found that preachers who maintain authenticity actually receive stronger audience responses than those who appear overly “packaged.” Muhazzib et al. (2025) add that the balance between digital professionalism and message simplicity becomes the key to sustainable personal branding in preaching.¹¹

Hanafi (2025), in her research on Ustadzah Halimah Alaydrus's personal branding, shows that content consistency and clarity of message are two critical factors in building trust with digital audiences.¹² Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2024) observe that the phenomenon of preacher-influencers today is inseparable from content strategies that balance visual aesthetics and message depth. In other words, personal branding in preaching is not merely about appearing attractive; it is about how that appearance reflects and reinforces the substance being conveyed.¹³

As a supporting theoretical lens, digital public relations (Luttrell, 2018) provides a complementary framework for understanding how content is distributed and amplified in this study. Digital PR differs from traditional PR in several fundamental ways: while conventional PR relies on press releases, conferences, and relationships with journalists, digital PR leverages platform algorithms, user-generated content, and engagement metrics to shape public opinion more organically and decentrally.¹⁴ In the digital ecosystem, the sharp line between planned campaigns and spontaneous conversation blurs—and that blurring is precisely where its power lies.

Gomez (2020) affirms that in the age of media convergence, an effective PR strategy creates narratives that “live” within communities, not merely broadcasts sent from the center to the periphery. This approach is highly relevant to what occurs in Indonesian digital preaching: content spreads not because a centralized team manages it, but because fan communities feel emotionally connected to the figures they support.¹⁵

In this context, fan pages and supporter accounts serve as unofficial PR teams that work entirely on a voluntary basis. They curate, edit, add text, and distribute content—all driven by affection for the figure they follow. Siregar et al. (2025), in their content analysis of the Instagram account @husein_hadar, found that supporter accounts have an impact equal to, and often greater than, that of the preacher's official account in terms of message

¹⁰ Andrea Parente, “On Disability Specialization,” *NYU Rev. L. & Soc. Change* 48 (2025): 76.

¹¹ Naufal Muhazzib and Twediana Budi Hapsari, “Digital Preaching Rhetoric on Tiktok Media: Case Study of Habib Husein Ja'far Account,” *MUHARRIK: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Sosial* 8, no. 1 (2025): 199–212.

¹² RONAA FAIRUZ HANAFI, “Personal Branding Ustadzah Halimah Alaydrus Dalam Berdakwah Di Media Sosial,” n.d.

¹³ Jacob Wallis et al., “Influence for Hire,” *Unpublished Manuscript*, 2021.

¹⁴ Regina Luttrell and Jamie Ward, *A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018).

¹⁵ José Gómez-Galán, “Media Education in the ICT Era: Theoretical Structure for Innovative Teaching Styles,” *Information* 11, no. 5 (2020): 276.

dissemination. This reveals that the digital PR ecosystem in Islamic preaching is polycentric, centered at multiple points simultaneously.¹⁶

The second supporting framework is parasocial communication, which provides analytical depth for understanding audience-preacher emotional dynamics in this study. This concept describes a one-way emotional bond that audiences feel toward a media figure—an illusion of closeness that, despite lacking real interaction, feels deeply personal (Horton & Wohl, 1956, cited in Famuji et al., 2025). In the social media era, this illusion is actually amplified by platform features such as comments, likes, shares, and duets or stitches on TikTok.¹⁷

Famuji et al. (2025) identify six parasocial intimacy strategies commonly used by millennial preachers on Instagram and TikTok: self-disclosure, interactive responsiveness, relatable language, emotional storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and participation in digital trends.¹⁸ They also found a clear distinction between the two platforms: Instagram tends to generate curated and aspirational intimacy, while TikTok creates spontaneous, viral impressions that feel more “human.”

Hardianti (2026) adds a gender perspective in her study of preaching strategies for Gen Z women, showing that parasocial intimacy operates differently depending on social context and prevailing normative expectations.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Wahyuni (2025), in her comparison of Instagram and TikTok, found that platform effectiveness depends heavily on communication goals: TikTok is more effective at building initial awareness, while Instagram is stronger at fostering long-term trust.²⁰

Comparative studies of Instagram and TikTok have become increasingly important as platform diversification among Indonesian users grows. Hsb (2025) found that preaching strategies on TikTok tend to use shorter, more entertaining formats that rely heavily on audiovisual elements such as background music and visual effects. Conversely, Instagram—particularly through Reels, carousels, and longer captions—is better suited for content requiring narrative depth.²¹

This difference is not merely about format but also about algorithms and user behavior. TikTok uses an aggressive For You Page (FYP) recommendation system that distributes content to new users, allowing videos to go viral in hours without requiring a large existing follower base. Instagram, conversely, relies more on an established follower network and organic engagement from existing communities.²²

The practical implications are quite significant: preachers or fan pages seeking rapid awareness should prioritize TikTok, while those aiming to build a loyal community should

¹⁶ Kombang Tua Siregar, Ilyas Zhakypkazy, and Badrah Uyuni, “Indonesian Muballigh and Religious Authority: From Sanad to Algorithmic Transformation of Islamic Knowledge Transmission in the Digital Era,” *Jurnal Indo-Islamika* 15, no. 2 (2025): 298–314.

¹⁷ Donald Horton and R Richard Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance,” *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 215–29.

¹⁸ Untung Famuji et al., “Komunikasi Parasosial Dai Milenial: Strategi Intimasi Di Instagram Dan Tiktok,” *Liwaul Dakwah: Jurnal Kajian Dakwah Dan Masyarakat Islam* 15, no. 2 (2025): 149–61.

¹⁹ Andi Warisno et al., “Transformative Islamic Education Management in Madrasah and Pesantren Integrating Tradition and Digital Innovation,” *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 2025, 276–89.

²⁰ Suriana Suriana, Teti Wahyuni, and Misbahul Jannah, “Optimizing Collaborative Learning of Islamic Religious Education Through Social Media,” *Al-Isblah: Jurnal Pendidikan* 17, no. 3 (2025): 3820–35.

²¹ Akmal Rizki Gunawan Hsb et al., “Analysis of Digital Technology on Da’wah Communication Strategies in the Modern Era,” *Al-Balagh: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 10, no. 1 (2025): 33–64.

²² Suriana, Wahyuni, and Jannah, “Optimizing Collaborative Learning of Islamic Religious Education Through Social Media.”

invest in Instagram. However, in Gus Kautsar's case, the two platforms are not managed separately-content that goes viral on TikTok often originates from the same videos circulating on Instagram, creating cross-platform synergy that reinforces his image simultaneously across both ecosystems.

This research employs a qualitative approach using a single case study design.²³ This design choice is based on the contextual and complex nature of the research subject, which cannot be measured through numerical means alone. Case studies enable researchers to achieve analytical depth unattainable through surveys or experiments, particularly when the phenomenon under study-organic personal branding construction through fan-generated content-is still relatively new and understudied in Indonesian digital preaching literature.

The research object is Gus Kautsar's digital public relations content strategy on Instagram and TikTok. Primary data were collected through non-participant observation of 120 content items, divided equally between 60 most popular Instagram posts (primarily from accounts @guskautsaronline and @teras.gubuk) and 60 TikTok posts (from fan accounts such as @nderekpusat_official and @santri.revolusi). Data collection spanned January 2024 through March 2026. The number of 120 content pieces (60 per platform) was determined based on data saturation considerations and the analytical capacity of comparative thematic analysis, following precedents in qualitative social media studies that typically examine between 60 and 150 content units to achieve thematic depth without sacrificing analytical rigor (Batinca & Treleaven, 2015). The focus on the most popular content was intentional. Since this study examines how personal branding is constructed through organic digital PR, high-engagement content represents the most socially impactful material and thus the most relevant unit of analysis. The term "most popular" was operationalized differently for each platform to respect their distinct algorithmic logics: on Instagram, popularity was measured by total likes and comment count using the platform's native sort-by-top feature; on TikTok, it was measured by total view count and share count using the account's video list sorted by most-viewed. This platform-sensitive operationalization ensures consistency of intent while respecting the structural differences between the two ecosystems.²⁴

The data analysis technique employed is comparative thematic analysis based on the model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2015), which comprises three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.²⁵ In the reduction stage, each piece of content is categorized based on theme, format, linguistic style, and audience response. In the display stage, the findings from both platforms are arranged in a parallel structure to facilitate comparison. In the conclusion-drawing stage, the findings are linked back to the theoretical frameworks used.²⁶

The analytical instruments consist of two main components. First, visual semiotics is utilized to analyze content elements such as image composition, overlay text, music choice, facial expressions, and captions.²⁷ Second, the application of Montoya's (2002) eight laws of

²³ Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, vol. 6 (Sage Thousand Oaks, CA, 2018).

²⁴ Bogdan Batinca and Philip C Treleaven, "Social Media Analytics: A Survey of Techniques, Tools and Platforms," *Ai & Society* 30, no. 1 (2015): 89–116.

²⁵ Sue Monaro, Janice Gullick, and Sandra West, "Qualitative Data Analysis for Health Research: A Step-by-Step Example of Phenomenological Interpretation," *Qualitative Report* 27, no. 4 (2022): 1040–57.

²⁶ Elmar Hashimov, "Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook and The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers: Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014. 381 Pp. Johnny Saldaña. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013. 303 Pp." (Taylor & Francis, 2015).

²⁷ Luc Pauwels, "Validating Visuals: A Socio-Semiotic Instrument for an Informed Production and Use of Visual Representations," *Social Semiotics* 33, no. 2 (2023): 426–45.

personal branding serves as an evaluative framework to assess the extent to which each content piece contributes to the construction of Gus Kautsar’s image.²⁸ Additionally, the six parasocial intimacy strategies formulated by Famuji et al. (2025) serve as a supplementary analytical matrix for understanding the mechanisms through which emotional proximity develops.²⁹

The validity of the research is maintained through two mechanisms. Source triangulation is conducted by comparing findings across platforms and across fan page accounts. Peer debriefing is conducted by discussing preliminary findings with two fellow researchers with expertise in digital communication and contemporary Islamic studies.³⁰ From an ethical standpoint, this study operates entirely within the realm of publicly accessible digital content material that can be viewed by any internet user without authentication or special permission, thereby minimizing direct privacy risks to individual users. Nevertheless, three ethical considerations warrant explicit acknowledgment. First, regarding awareness: the fan page administrators whose content was analyzed were not formally notified, as is standard practice in non-participant observation of public social media content (Batrinsa & Treleaven, 2015); however, the researcher acknowledges that this constitutes a methodological boundary. Second, regarding intellectual property: all analyzed content was treated as fan-generated material distributed voluntarily in the public sphere; no content was reproduced verbatim in this study, and all citations follow fair-use principles for academic research. Third, regarding informed consent: since this study analyzes aggregate content patterns rather than individual behavior or personal data, formal informed consent from account holders was not required under standard qualitative internet research ethics guidelines. Future research involving direct interviews with fan page administrators would require formal consent procedures.

Result and Discussion

Content Strategy on Instagram: Building Depth and Community

An analysis of the 120 most popular content pieces, evaluated primarily through Montoya's (2002) eight laws of personal branding and supported by Luttrell's (2018) digital PR model and Famuji et al.'s (2025) parasocial intimacy framework, reveals distinct yet complementary differences in content strategies between Instagram and TikTok. These differences are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1. Technical Characteristics and Content Formats of Instagram versus TikTok in Constructing Gus Kautsar’s Personal Branding (2024- 2026 Period)

No	Aspect of Comparison	Instagram (@teras.gubuk, @guskautsaronline)	TikTok (@nderepusat_official & supporting fan accounts)
1	Follower Count & Reach	262K (@teras.gubuk) + 135K (@guskautsaronline)	High virality (hundreds of thousands to millions of views per video)

²⁸ Montoya and Vandehey, *The Personal Branding Phenomenon: Realize Greater Influence, Explosive Income Growth and Rapid Career Advancement by Applying the Branding Techniques of Michael, Martha & Oprah.*

²⁹ Famuji et al., “Komunikasi Parasosial Dai Milenial: Strategi Intimasi Di Instagram Dan Tiktok.”

³⁰ E Abdulrohimi et al., “Islamic Communication in the 21st Century: Principles, Methods, Practices, Digital Transformation and Contemporary Applications,” *Bulletin of Islamic Research* 3, no. 4 (2025): 571–94.

2	Primary Content Format	Reels + Carousel Posts	Short Video (single clip)
3	Content Duration	30-90 Second	7-30 Second
4	Visual Style & Aesthetics	Polished, <i>pesantren</i> backgrounds, calligraphy fonts, and neat graphic design	Fast transition effects, text overlays, light <i>nashied</i> music

Source: Data compiled from observations of official accounts and fan pages as of April 2026.

Table 2. Communication Strategies, Engagement, and Personal Branding Implications on Instagram versus TikTok

No	Aspect of Comparison	Instagram (@teras.gubuk, @guskautsaronline)	TikTok (@nderekpusat_official & supporting fan accounts)	Implications for Gus Kautsar's Personal Branding (Montoya, 2002)
1	Linguistic Style & Narrative	Long captions, Arabic translations, reflective narratives	Strong Javanese dialect, humorous, relatable, fast-paced storytelling	<i>Distinctiveness & Personality</i>
2	Da'wah Themes	<i>Akhlak</i> (morals), marriage, simplicity, repentance (in-depth narratives)	Same themes, but packaged humorously and uplifting (<i>anti-galan</i>)	<i>Unity & Specialization</i>
3	Type of Engagement	Substantive & reflective comments, loyal community	Likes, shares, duets/stitches, rapid virality	Instagram: long-term loyalty; TikTok: massive awareness
4	Role of Documentation	TG Digital Documentation Team (professional curation)	Spontaneous fan-generated content	Organic digital PR & Goodwill

Source: Data compiled from observations of official accounts and fan pages as of April 2026

One of the most striking patterns is the use of lengthy captions that serve not merely as content descriptions, but rather as a narrative continuation of the video itself. These captions frequently contain the context of the *dawuh* (teachings/quotes), explanations of the situational background, and invitations for personal reflection. For instance, a post themed “Be a husband who laughs at home” not only features a video clip of Gus Kautsar delivering the advice but is also accompanied by a caption elaborating on the importance of a husband’s emotional presence in the family, along with a prompt to share it with one’s partner. This

pattern aligns with what Famuji et al. (2025) identified as an emotional storytelling strategy that strengthens parasocial intimacy.³¹

The hashtags utilized also indicate a well-planned community design. Tags such as #dawuhguskautsar, #nderekyai, and #guskautsarploso are used consistently across accounts, creating a search ecosystem that helps new users discover Gus Kautsar's content while reinforcing the community identity for existing followers. This is a concrete manifestation of the laws of unity and specialization within Montoya's (2002) framework: all elements of communication are directed toward a single, clear, and consistent identity.

In terms of engagement, content on Instagram tends to generate more substantive comments compared to TikTok. Many users leave lengthy comments containing personal reflections, follow-up questions, or brief anecdotes detailing how Gus Kautsar's advice is relevant to their lives. This phenomenon indicates that Instagram successfully creates a more contemplative interaction space, aligning with Wahyuni's (2025) finding that this platform is more effective for building long-term trust.³²

Interestingly, the most active fan pages, such as @guskautsaronline, appear to possess a strong grasp of curatorial principles. They do not merely repost video clips; rather, they select the most compelling moments, incorporate relevant text overlays, and adapt content formats to align with current Instagram trends. This role is equivalent to that of a content editor within a professional PR team, except that it is performed voluntarily by fans. Setiawan et al. (2025) term this phenomenon a "polycentric PR ecosystem," in which distribution authority is dispersed among multiple actors.³³

Content Strategy on TikTok: Speed, Humor, and Virality

In contrast to Instagram, TikTok's content strategy is significantly more dynamic, brief, and virality-oriented. Of the 60 TikTok content pieces analyzed, the majority are 7-30 seconds long, considerably shorter than Instagram content. The predominant format is a single video clip featuring heavy Javanese text overlays, light *nasheed* music or acoustic songs as background audio, alongside fast transition effects that align with platform trends.³⁴

The themes raised are fundamentally similar to those on Instagram—advice on marriage, friendship, *akhlak* (morals), and life motivation—yet the method of presentation is entirely different. On TikTok, humor becomes the primary weapon. Advice delivered with a reflective tone on Instagram is frequently packaged on TikTok as brief storytelling, culminating in a surprising punchline. For instance, a *dawuh* (teaching) about avoiding emotional distress (*galau*) is presented in a "three things that bring peace to life" format, delivered at a fast pace with text appearing sequentially in sync with the musical rhythm.

This strategy is highly effective within the context of the TikTok algorithm, which prioritizes watch time and completion rate. Short, entertaining content with elements of surprise tends to be watched to the end, and this data prompts the For You Page algorithm to distribute it to a broader user base. Consequently, several of Gus Kautsar's TikTok videos surpassed 1

³¹ Famuji et al., "Shifting Religious Authority in the AI Era: A Comparative Study of Gen Z Trust in AI Guidance and Traditional Ulama."

³² Suriana, Wahyuni, and Jannah, "Optimizing Collaborative Learning of Islamic Religious Education Through Social Media."

³³ Siregar, Zhakypkazy, and Uyuni, "Indonesian Muballigh and Religious Authority: From Sanad to Algorithmic Transformation of Islamic Knowledge Transmission in the Digital Era."

³⁴ Alem Febri Sonni, "Algorithmic Gender Representation in Digital Journalism: A Perspective on Platform-Mediated Masculinities in Indonesian Media," *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 7 (2025): 1735924.

million views in less than 24 hours, far exceeding the organic reach of Instagram content with similar engagement metrics.³⁵

The use of heavy Javanese vernacular-particularly the East Javanese dialect with a distinct Kediri accent-serves as a strong differentiating factor. Within Montoya's personal branding framework, this is a manifestation of the law of distinctiveness: there is something unique and difficult to replicate about Gus Kautsar's communication style. Even viewers from outside Javanese culture claim to be attracted precisely by this linguistic uniqueness, which feels authentic and unfeigned.

The duet and stitch features on TikTok also contribute significantly to content dissemination. Several users create reaction content to Gus Kautsar's clips or use the audio from his *dawuh* as background audio for their own content. This practice effectively expands the content's reach to a wider social network without additional effort from the original fan page. Within Luttrell's (2018) framework, this is a prime example of user-generated amplification-where the audience becomes an active distribution agent.³⁶

Cross-Platform Synergy and the Construction of Organic Personal Branding

The comparative analysis of Instagram and TikTok reveals something more compelling than mere differences: both operate synergistically to construct Gus Kautsar's personal branding. Instagram builds deep audiences who have already become acquainted with Gus Kautsar through TikTok, and they migrate to Instagram to access more substantive content, join the community, and deepen their understanding. TikTok, conversely, serves as the initial gateway-the place where millions of people are first introduced to this figure through entertaining short clips.

This synergy creates an organic content funnel: TikTok acts as an awareness engine, while Instagram functions as a loyalty engine. New audiences captured via TikTok tend to seek out related Instagram accounts to access more content-and it is there that they are "bound" through a more cohesive community. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Wahyuni (2025) and Hsb (2023), who independently identified the strengths of each platform but had not yet combined them into an integrated synergy model.

The most fascinating aspect of Gus Kautsar's case is that this entire process occurs without his direct involvement. There is no management team, no official content strategy, and no briefings provided to fan pages-everything stems from the initiative of fans who feel called to disseminate messages they deem valuable. In digital PR literature, this phenomenon is referred to as organic earned media-media gained organically at no cost due to the quality of the content and the strength of pre-existing emotional connections.³⁷

From the perspective of Montoya's (2002) eight laws of personal branding, this process successfully realizes all of the formulated dimensions: specialization (Gus Kautsar is known as a preacher with a distinctive humorous yet profound Javanese *pesantren* style), leadership (he has become a reference point for life advice for millions of youths), personality (there is no performative or artificial impression in his content), distinctiveness (his linguistic style and characteristic accent are unrivaled), visibility (his content is present on two major platforms simultaneously), unity (the themes of *akhlak*, family, and motivation remain

³⁵ Hsb et al., "Analysis of Digital Technology on Da'wah Communication Strategies in the Modern Era."

³⁶ Luttrell and Ward, *A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations*.

³⁷ Tala Almaghrabi, "Memes in Marketing: Exploring How Internet Memes Can Be Integrated into Social Media Marketing Activities in a Manner That Is Accepted by Online Communities" (Brunel University London, 2023).

consistent), persistence (his image does not alter despite shifting platform trends), and goodwill (the audience perceives sincerity in every *dawuh* delivered).³⁸

Nevertheless, it is important to note several critical caveats. Reliance on fan pages carries the risk of misrepresentation if the content is not verified for accuracy. Clips taken out of context can lead to misinterpretations of what Gus Kautsar actually intended. In this case, the risk is relatively controlled because his strong *pesantren* roots provide a natural filter for circulating content-fans who understand the context of *pesantren* teachings can generally distinguish between clips that represent the substance of the *da'wah* and those that do not. Even so, a more systematic verification mechanism remains an undeniable necessity.

These findings also reinforce the relevance of the parasocial communication concept in understanding the dynamics of digital *da'wah*. As articulated by Famuji et al. (2025), the emotional proximity felt by the audience toward a *da'i* (preacher)-even when actual interaction between the two is highly limited or non-existent-serves as the primary fuel for content dissemination activities.³⁹ Gus Kautsar's fans do not merely watch and consume content; they actively share it because they feel a personal resonance within those messages. This is the power of parasocial communication, which, when properly understood, can become the most highly effective digital PR strategy.

Implications for Digital *Da'wah* Practices

The findings from this case study have several important implications. First, it demonstrates that a strong digital presence does not always require an official account or an expensive campaign. What is far more decisive is the quality of the message and its ability to create emotional resonance with the audience. Gus Kautsar does not need to manage an account himself because his content naturally compels fans to assume the role of distribution.

Second, these findings assert that platform strategies cannot be generalized. Preachers who are active on only one platform miss out on half of their potential audience. A hybrid approach-utilizing TikTok for initial awareness and Instagram for strengthening long-term relationships-proves to be more effective than single-platform usage.⁴⁰

Third, there is an essential lesson regarding authenticity. Gus Kautsar's content never feels like an orchestrated PR campaign, and that is precisely what makes it successful. Digital audiences-particularly Gen Z-are highly sensitive to content that feels contrived or harbors a hidden agenda. Authentic *da'wah*, which flows from sincere conviction and a consistent character, is far more effective in building long-term trust than even the most sophisticated content strategy.

Conclusion

The most compelling aspect of this case is that the entire personal branding construction process occurs organically, without any direct involvement from Gus Kautsar himself. Fan pages and supporting accounts act as an unofficial PR team, curating and distributing content based on their devotion to the figure they follow. This phenomenon indicates that in the social media era, the power of an authentic message and sincere emotional resonance can

³⁸ Montoya and Vandehey, *The Personal Branding Phenomenon: Realize Greater Influence, Explosive Income Growth and Rapid Career Advancement by Applying the Branding Techniques of Michael, Martha & Oprah*.

³⁹ Untung Famuji et al., "Click, Share, Da'wah: Spiritual Revolution at Your Fingertips" 9, no. 02 (2025): 121-35.

⁴⁰ Suriana, Wahyuni, and Jannah, "Optimizing Collaborative Learning of Islamic Religious Education Through Social Media."

mobilize a distribution mechanism no less effective than even the most expensive professional PR campaigns.

This study also found that Montoya's (2002) eight laws of personal branding manifest organically through this process—not as the result of deliberate planning, but rather as a natural consequence of the character consistency and sincerity of the messages conveyed by Gus Kautsar. These findings suggest that, in the context of digital *da'wah*, authenticity is not merely an ethical value but also the most effective communication strategy.

Several recommendations can be formulated based on these findings. For preachers seeking to leverage social media, a hybrid approach combining TikTok and Instagram is more effective than using a single platform. Investing in message quality is far more crucial than investing in expensive content production. For *da'wah* institutions and the government, these findings can serve as a foundation for training programs in digital PR strategy for young *ulama* (clerics). For future researchers, longitudinal studies measuring the impact on audience behavior—such as attitudinal shifts, worship practices, or community engagement—would complement the groundwork laid by this research.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations, and acknowledging them is essential for situating its findings appropriately. First, selecting only the most popular content introduces a representativeness bias: high-engagement posts may not reflect the full diversity of content distributed across fan pages, potentially overrepresenting viral or emotionally charged material while underrepresenting everyday or lower-reach posts that nonetheless contribute to Gus Kautsar's overall digital image. Second, the absence of direct access to platform analytics means engagement figures were inferred from publicly visible metrics rather than verified backend data, which limits the precision of quantitative claims about reach and performance. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the perspective of Gus Kautsar himself remains absent from this study. His personal understanding of, or intentionality behind, the organic PR ecosystem that has formed around him could substantially enrich — or complicate — the interpretations offered here. Future research should prioritize direct engagement with the figure at the center of this phenomenon, as well as longitudinal tracking to capture how branding dynamics shift amid platform algorithm changes and evolving audience demographics.

Gus Kautsar reminds us that even the most advanced communication technology is merely a tool. What ultimately dictates impact is not the platform or its algorithm, but rather the depth of the message and the genuine character of the person delivering it. Islamic *da'wah* in the digital space is not solely about how broad its reach is, but how deeply its meaning becomes embedded in the lives of the audience who experience it.

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