



The Phenomenon of Islamic Boarding School Traditions Against Modernity: A Case Study of Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School from the Perspective of Mass Media and Social Media

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Abstract

The phenomenon of modernity, characterized by the acceleration of information technology and the dominance of digital media, has generated profound social, cultural, and epistemological transformations across various spheres of life including within traditional Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren. This article provides an in-depth examination of how Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo in Kediri, East Java, negotiates its traditional identity within the context of digital modernity. The study focuses on the public controversy surrounding the Xpose Uncensored program aired by Trans7 in October 2025, which sparked extensive public reactions. Employing a qualitative approach within the theoretical frameworks of the mediatization of religion and cultural negotiation, this research integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of mass media coverage with digital ethnography to trace the dynamics of online discourse and public narratives across platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The findings reveal that Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo does not reject modernity outright but rather constructs a model of selective modernization a form of critical engagement with technology and digital media that maintains the core values of Islamic ethics and pesantren traditions. The responses of the pesantren community and santri toward the Trans7 broadcast demonstrate a symbolic awareness aimed at preserving moral authority amid media representation disruptions. Meanwhile, the active use of social media by santri and alumni serves as an instrument of counter-discourse against mainstream media framing, simultaneously strengthening the pesantren's presence and legitimacy within the digital public sphere. This study concludes that pesantren are now transforming into active cultural agents within the process of mediatization not merely objects of media representation but subjects capable of managing their image, discourse, and identity amidst the flux of global modernity. The phenomenon reinforces the argument that tradition and modernity within Indonesian Islam are not in binary opposition, but exist in a dynamic and productive dialectical relationship.

Keywords:

Pesantren, modernity; mediatization; lirboyo; trans7; social media; digital culture.

A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) constitute one of the oldest and most influential educational institutions in the archipelago. They play a strategic role in shaping the moral, social, and intellectual dispositions of Muslim communities (Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025; Ghani & Ayaz, 2025). The institutional configuration of pesantren, which integrates the authority of the kiai, the everyday life of santri, and the study of kitab kuning, generates an epistemic environment that privileges adab (ethical comportment), sanad

(knowledge transmission), and social self-sufficiency(Al-Kassimi et al., 2025). This setting not only sustains the continuity of classical Islamic scholarship but also facilitates the embodied internalization of moral and spiritual values, enabling a holistic mode of character formation(Maspul, 2025; Sukmawaty et al., 2025).

Educational practice within pesantren extends beyond text-based instruction. Communal living, ritual routines, and the exemplary conduct of the kiai constitute an integrative and context-sensitive pedagogical framework(Putra et al., 2025; Shobri et al., 2025). Through these experiences, students not merely acquire doctrinal knowledge but also learn to interpret and enact moral and spiritual values in their everyday social interactions. Consequently, pesantren function as institutions of collective identity formation in which pedagogy, ethics, and spirituality are mutually reinforcing(Hasanah, 2024).

Within Indonesia's sociocultural landscape, pesantren also operate as moral and cultural symbols that mediate the relationship between Islam and local traditions. They serve as community-based institutions that preserve cultural heritage, enforce ethical norms, and reinforce social cohesion. In this sense, pesantren bridge the epistemic continuity of classical Islam with contemporary social dynamics, demonstrating institutional resilience amid changing technological, cultural, and communicative environments (Firnando et al., 2025; Safitri et al., 2025; Wajdi et al., 2025)

The rapid expansion of modernity, globalization, and digitalization introduces new complexities for pesantren. Digital communication technologies have altered how religious knowledge is accessed, evaluated, and circulated. As a result, the authority of kiai and the legitimacy of pesantren can no longer rely solely on face-to-face interaction and classical textual study. Pesantren are therefore compelled to negotiate the imperatives of digital communication, which emphasize speed, visibility, and interactivity, while maintaining commitment to their foundational ethical and spiritual values(Anggawirya et al., 2025).

The dynamics of mediatization become particularly visible in the controversy surrounding the Xpose Uncensored broadcast by Trans7 in October 2025, which featured the daily activities of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo(MUI.OR.ID, 2025; Tsuladze et al., 2025). Field observations indicate that the production team employed fragmented filming techniques, selectively capturing scenes that were visually striking yet contextually incomplete, such as students engaging in physical activities, informal conversations in dormitories, or religious rituals without explanatory framing. These visual fragments were subsequently edited with fast-paced sequencing, tension-building music, and exaggerated narration, producing a sensationalized representation of pesantren life. Such media framing transforms pesantren into an exoticized and dramatic spectacle, obscuring the pedagogical, ethical, and spiritual foundations that structure everyday life within the institution(Taufikin, 2025).

Interviews with students reveal a shared sentiment that their lived experiences were reduced to isolated scenes that failed to capture the interplay between knowledge, ethics, and spirituality that defines their learning environment(Aithal, 2025). Administrators similarly expressed concern that the broadcast crossed epistemic boundaries, violating internal norms that regulate the visibility of learning spaces, prayer rituals, and private residential areas. These concerns show that the issue extends beyond representation; it touches on the sanctity of institutional spaces and practices that carry deep moral and epistemic significance(Kahl, 2025).

This incident underscores the broader challenge pesantren face in maintaining epistemic and moral legitimacy within a media environment shaped by visual commodification and rapid content circulation. Within such an ecosystem, institutional authority becomes vulnerable to external narratives that prioritize spectacle over substance. Mediatization thus not only influences how pesantren are perceived but has the potential to intervene in how pesantren articulate and preserve their own identity within the social sphere(Nadhifah & Pramono, 2025).

The response of the pesantren community demonstrates a sophisticated and increasingly coordinated adaptation to digital communication. Field data show that within

24 hours of the broadcast, thousands of students, alumni, and supporters began uploading clarification videos, excerpts of kiai lectures, and documentation of scholarly and social activities absent from the televised portrayal (Arifin et al., 2025). The hashtags #SaveLirboyoy and #BoikotTrans7 functioned not merely as expressions of outrage but as mechanisms of discursive coordination. Through these hashtags, the community carved out a digital arena in which they challenged the mainstream media's framing and asserted their own narrative authority (Orgeret et al., 2025).

These digital interventions reveal a process that can be described as symbolic re-centering, wherein pesantren reclaim interpretive control by grounding their counter-narratives in epistemic values intrinsic to the institution. Student-produced videos not only refuted misrepresentations but also provided detailed accounts of classical text pedagogy, discipline rooted in adab, the structure of sorogan and bandongan learning, and the epistemic relationship between students and kiai. This effort represents an intentional strategy to reassert pesantren's moral authority and reorient public understanding toward the institution's core values (Adhikari et al., 2025; Wickramasinghe et al., 2025).

The mobilization of alumni networks across regions further amplified these counter-discourses. Alumni contributed testimonies, historical explanations, and critiques of unethical media practices, reinforcing a sense of shared defense of the institution. This emerging networked moral community demonstrates a shift in how pesantren authority is upheld: not solely through traditional hierarchical structures but through horizontally organized digital solidarity (Davydzik, 2025; Raya, 2025).

The Xpose Uncensored controversy thus highlights that pesantren are not merely passive subjects of mediatization but active agents capable of navigating and shaping digital publics. Their coordinated, value-driven, and argumentatively structured responses show that pesantren have moved beyond defensive postures. They are actively developing communicative strategies to maintain moral legitimacy, manage public representation, and expand their epistemic presence within the digital sphere (Bartsch et al., 2025).

Field observations further indicate that pesantren increasingly employ digital media to manage public narratives, clarify misunderstood practices, and disseminate teachings consistent with their epistemic traditions. This reflects a mode of selective modernization, in which pesantren adopt elements of modern communication that align with their values while resisting those perceived to undermine institutional authority. Theoretically, this study positions pesantren as active cultural agents within the process of mediatization. Rather than merely adapting to digital pressures, pesantren strategically curate their visibility, discourse, and identity in the digital public sphere.

The contribution of this research lies in integrating mediatization theory with selective modernity, employing digital ethnography to trace counter-discourse strategies, and foregrounding how pesantren negotiate moral legitimacy in the face of biased or sensational media framings. Prior scholarship has tended to emphasize resistance or descriptive accounts of pesantren's encounter with modernity. Few studies have systematically examined the communicative strategies through which pesantren engage digital publics. This study fills that gap by demonstrating how pesantren actively shape social and cultural realities through value driven adaptation to digital modernity.

B. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in the constructivist paradigm, aiming to understand how pesantren is interpreted, represented, and negotiated within the context of digital modernity (Nadhifah & Pramono, 2025). The constructivist paradigm views social reality as an intersubjective construction produced through language, symbols, and social practices rather than as an objective and static entity (Benfeldt & Persson, 2025). Accordingly, this research does not seek to measure phenomena quantitatively but rather to trace the dynamic processes of meaning-making that occur among pesantren actors, mass media institutions, and digital publics. Through this

interpretive orientation, the study seeks to explore how the reality of pesantren is constructed through media discourse and how online communities respond to, reinterpret, and renegotiate those meanings within the digital communication sphere (Greco & Leone, 2025).

The research design integrates two complementary methodological strategies: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and digital ethnography to provide a comprehensive understanding of both textual representations and social dynamics. The CDA approach follows Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which consists of textual analysis, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice (Loso et al., 2025). At the textual level, this study examines linguistic and semiotic structures such as diction, metaphors, and visual framing found in the Xpose Uncensored broadcast on Trans7 (October 2025) and in related online news articles from Antara News, Radar Kediri, and Kompas.com. The analysis of discursive practices investigates how power relations between the media and pesantren shape narrative construction and message dissemination, revealing the underlying institutional dynamics. Meanwhile, the socio-cultural practice analysis situates the discourse within the ideological framework of secular modernity, which often positions traditional religious institutions as the "Other." Through these analytical layers, the research seeks to identify how pesantren is represented in public discourse whether as a symbol of conservatism, a moral community, or an institution negotiating adaptation within digital modernity.

To complement the discourse analysis, this study also applies digital ethnography (Li & Huang, 2025) to trace the dynamics of public conversation on social media in response to the Trans7 broadcast. Online participant observation was conducted across Twitter/X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube between 13 and 20 October 2025. Data collection focused on tracking hashtags, comments, reposts, and visual narratives associated with Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo. The collected digital data were then subjected to thematic coding, generating four main analytical categories: (1) defense of pesantren identity, (2) criticism of media institutions, (3) reflection on santri identity in digital spaces, and (4) digital innovation in pesantren's dakwah and education practices.

The analytical process followed an iterative and inductive trajectory, allowing themes and patterns to emerge naturally from the data. Triangulation between the findings of discourse analysis and digital ethnography was applied to ensure validity and interpretive depth, producing a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This methodological synthesis not only examines how pesantren is represented by mainstream media but also investigates how pesantren actors and digital communities negotiate, resist, and reconstruct such representations through moral and discursive strategies in virtual public spaces. Ultimately, this approach reveals the transformation of pesantren from a passive object of representation into an active moral agent participating in the broader process of the mediatization of religion (Hidayat & Wahyono, 2025) in the era of digital modernity.

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

Representation of Pesantren in Mainstream Media Discourse

The critical discourse analysis of the Xpose Uncensored program on Trans7 and its subsequent online media coverage reveals that the representation of pesantren remains trapped within a reductionist symbolic construction. Pesantren are portrayed through visual imagery that emphasizes cultural exoticism, social seclusion, and resistance to modernity. Within the media's discursive production, pesantren are positioned as epistemically and morally distinct entities from the modern world—a form of othering that reinforces cultural distance between pesantren communities and the wider public (Ndifereke & Bassey, 2025).

Drawing on Fairclough's framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, media texts are not merely conveyors of information but active instruments in producing and reproducing power relations (Haobo, 2025; Nusra, 2025). The lexical choices found in these narratives such as "closed world," "ancient teachings," and "strict discipline" reveal the operation of a

dominant ideology underlying media language. Such discourse reflects the secular-modernist worldview that privileges rationality, openness, and progress, thereby positioning anything outside this frame, including pesantren, as the Other. From Bourdieu's theoretical perspective, this can be understood as a form of symbolic violence, wherein domination is exercised through language and imagery to maintain the hegemony of modern knowledge structures over traditional religious systems(Fatah, 2025).

The visual structure of the Xpose Uncensored broadcast further reinforces this discourse through cinematographic techniques that employ dark tones, dramatic narration, and camera angles evoking mystery and extreme discipline. This practice exemplifies visual sensationalism, an aesthetic strategy designed to attract audience attention through emotional intensity rather than cultural understanding. Consequently, pesantren become entrapped in a partial and disproportionate media image, detached from their reality as dynamic Islamic educational institutions with strategic roles in social and moral development.

Nevertheless, the discursive dynamics are not entirely uniform. A longitudinal analysis of subsequent coverage indicates a narrative shift following the surge of public reaction on social media. Several outlets, including Radar Kediri and Kompas.com, began adopting more balanced framings by including clarifications from Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo. In these revised portrayals, pesantren are represented as centers of moral and social education that contribute significantly to national character formation. This shift signifies a process of symbolic negotiation between pesantren authorities and mass media, where pesantren no longer serve merely as the object of discourse, but also emerge as active subjects negotiating their image and meaning within the public sphere.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the relationship between pesantren and media is not purely oppositional but dialectical. While the media possesses the power to frame reality through the logic of industry and information commodification, pesantren retain symbolic authority rooted in moral and religious traditions. The intersection of these two forces produces not only conflict but also a process of mediatization(Forward & Muslim, 2025) the transformation of social and religious institutions through the logic of media communication. Hence, the representation of pesantren in mainstream media should not be viewed as a unilateral construction but rather as the outcome of a negotiated interaction between media ideology and the adaptive strategies of Islamic tradition in the digital era.

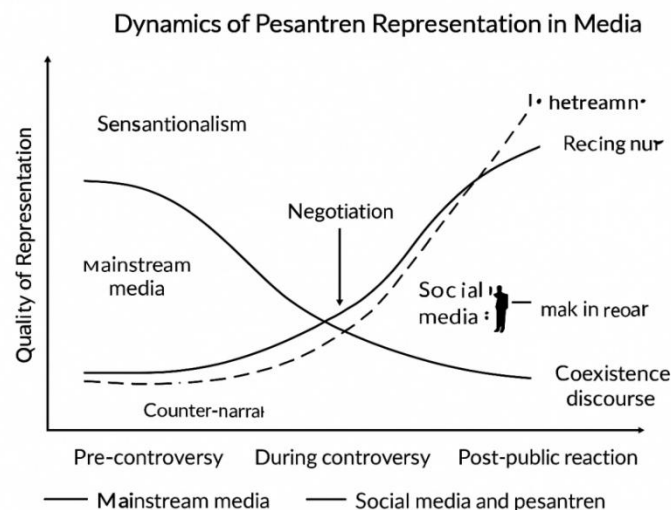


Figure 1. Dynamics of Pesantren Representation in media(Masuwd et al., 2025)

Dynamics of Public Reactions on Social Media

Findings from the digital ethnography reveal that social media functions as a site of symbolic contestation where santri (students), alumni, the general public, and even media

actors compete to define the meaning of pesantren within the digital public sphere. This phenomenon demonstrates that online spaces are not merely arenas for personal expression but rather fields of symbolic struggle (Hapsari et al., 2025), in which moral and cultural legitimacy is contested through the production and circulation of digital discourse. In the context of the Xpose Uncensored (Trans7) case, social media becomes a site for negotiating meaning between the pesantren image constructed by mainstream media and the counter-image created by the pesantren community itself.

Monitoring more than 7,000 online interactions across Twitter/X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube between 13–20 October 2025 identified four dominant patterns of public response that collectively shape the configuration of digital discourse.

First, the narrative of defending the pesantren dominates approximately 52% of all online conversations. Santri, alumni, and supporters actively produced clarification content and positive narratives grounded in values of *adab* (ethics), *barakah* (spiritual blessing), and *ukhuwah* (solidarity), emphasizing that pesantren are not spaces of violence or backwardness but institutions of moral and spiritual education. They employed solidarity hashtags such as #KamiSantriLirboyo, #CintaPesantren, and #HormatiPesantren to construct a counter-public sphere (Fraser, 1990) an alternative public space where religious communities assert their identity and authority amid secular media dominance. This pattern also reflects the emergence of a digital ummah (Nisa, 2022), a new form of spiritual community bound symbolically through online religious solidarity that transcends physical boundaries.

Second, criticism of mainstream media accounts for around 28% of interactions, primarily expressed by academics, independent journalists, and members of the public. These criticisms target biased and culturally insensitive media framing practices, accusing Trans7 of ethical lapses and failure to appreciate the cultural and religious context of pesantren. The public discourse calls for ethical representation of religion in media demanding journalistic accountability in narrating religious institutions without distortion or visual sensationalism. This pattern indicates an increasing level of religious media literacy (Adisa & Oluwatosin, 2025), as the public becomes more critically aware of how media constructs religious realities and influences collective perceptions of Islam.

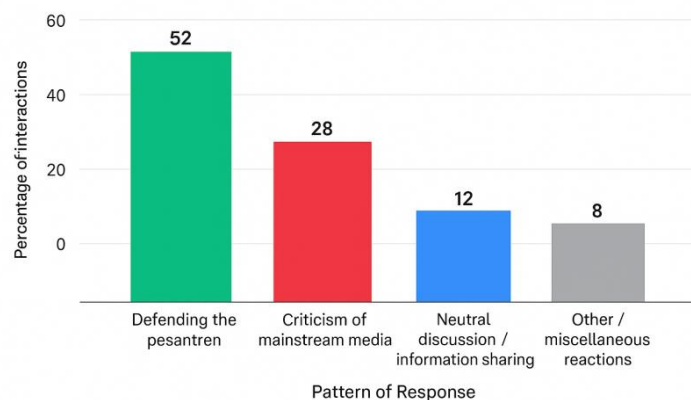


Figure 2. Patterns Of Public Response To The pose Uncensored Cae On digiltal Platforms.

Third, the reflection of *santri* identity emerges as a form of symbolic resistance. Through posts featuring daily activities, *kitab kuning* study sessions, and community engagement, *santri* and alumni engage in re-authoring their public image. They use digital media to showcase an inclusive, rational, and progressive face of *pesantren*, thereby countering the mystical and conservative stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream media. This dynamic illustrates that social media functions as a site of Islamic meaning production, where *santri* are no longer passive subjects of coverage but active agents constructing religious narratives through digital aesthetics and public participation.

Fourth, the phenomenon of digital innovation by pesantren is evident in the creative activities of Pondok Lirboyo and its alumni networks, who have developed dakwah-based content on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram Reels. The produced content extends beyond normative religious messages, incorporating educational, social, and cultural dimensions presented in accessible, interactive formats aligned with the algorithmic logic of social media. This strategy represents strategic adaptation (Description et al., 2025), wherein religious institutions adapt to the logic of mediatization while preserving their theological principles and moral authority.

Theoretically, these four patterns of public reaction illustrate an epistemic transformation of pesantren in the digital age. Pesantren are no longer closed institutions constructed solely from external representations but have become active actors within the mediated public sphere, capable of generating counter-discourses that challenge secular-modernist framings. Consequently, social media functions not merely as a site of entertainment but as a space of dakwah and symbolic diplomacy, where pesantren negotiate to sustain the legitimacy of their traditions in an increasingly connected society.

Table 1. *Thematic Distribution of Public Reactions to the Trans7–Lirboyo Case (13–20 October 2025)*

No	Public Reaction Theme	Thematic Description	Number of Interactions (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Defense of Pesantren	Clarification content based on <i>adab</i> , <i>barakah</i> , and digital solidarity (#KamiSantriLirboyo, #CintaPesantren). Formation of a digital ummah and reinforcement of collective <i>santri</i> identity.	3,640	52.0
2	Criticism of Media	Critique of framing and journalistic ethics in mainstream media (Trans7, <i>Xpose</i>). Demand for ethical responsibility in religious representation.	1,960	28.0
3	Reflection of Santri Identity	Testimonial content, daily-life videos, and community engagement. A form of counter-discourse to negative <i>pesantren</i> portrayals.	980	14.0
4	Pesantren Digital Innovation	<i>Dakwah</i> content production on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram by Lirboyo and its alumni. A form of strategic adaptation to mediatization.	420	6.0
Total	—	—	7,000	100.0

Source: Results of digital ethnographic observation, 13–20 October 2025.

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity within the Mediated Space

The findings of this study demonstrate that the relationship between *pesantren* and digital modernity is not dichotomous but unfolds through a complex process of symbolic negotiation between two regimes of meaning: the regime of values (spiritual ethics) and the regime of images (media aesthetics). In the case of the conflict between Trans7 and Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo, the apparent clash on the surface actually reflects a deeper epistemological divergence between the pesantren's moral communication and the media logic of the modern broadcasting industry (Adeni, 2025).

The pesantren operates within an epistemic framework oriented toward meaning, *adab* (ethical conduct), and the continuity of Islamic scholarly traditions. In contrast, modern media institutions function according to principles of visibility, speed, and sensationalism strategies designed to capture public attention. When the logic of spirituality encounters the

logic of visibility, a process of symbolic translation emerges, wherein both parties reinterpret themselves and their communicative counterparts within a newly mediated order.

From the perspective of the mediatization of religion theory (Alpuğan, 2024), pesantren are not merely objects of media representation but have evolved into actors capable of internalizing media logic to expand their dakwah (religious outreach) in the digital public sphere. For instance, in response to the Trans7 controversy, Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo did not adopt an entirely oppositional stance but instead engaged through the production of digital clarification and dakwah content. This strategy illustrates a shift from passive representation to active mediation, as pesantren participate in constructing public meaning through social media platforms.

The concept of selective modernity is key to understanding this dynamic. Modernity, in the context of pesantren, is not accepted as a monolithic ideology but is treated as a symbolic resource that can be filtered through the principles of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law). Pesantren selectively adopt technological and communicative tools that reinforce Islamic values such as interactive dakwah media, digital kitab learning platforms, and alumni networking systems while rejecting aspects of modernity associated with religious commodification or spiritual trivialization (Mustofa et al., 2023)

This negotiation underscores that pesantren possess cultural agency in engaging with mediatization rather than being passive victims of modernity. They have transformed into moral actors within the digital public sphere, capable of redirecting religious discourse toward ethics, civility, and the sustainability of Islamic values. Thus, the relationship between tradition and modernity has shifted from an antagonistic paradigm to one of dialectical coexistence, wherein tradition serves as an adaptive moral resource that reshapes public morality amid the global media logic. (Happyana & Istiqomah, 2025)

Table 2. *Negotiation of Tradition and Modernity within the Mediated Space of Pesantren*

Aspect	Traditional Regime (Pesantren Values)	Modern Regime (Media Logic)	Negotiated Form (Selective Modernity)
Epistemology	Meaning-based, rooted in <i>adab</i> and <i>sanad</i>	Image-based, oriented toward speed and spectacle	Symbolic translation between moral meaning and media narrative
Communication Logic	Moral and dialogical	Industrial and performative	Ethical mediation using digital storytelling
Authority	Based on knowledge and spiritual legitimacy	Based on visibility and audience engagement	Moral authority extended through digital presence
Cultural Orientation	Preservation of tradition	Innovation and audience appeal	Strategic adaptation grounded in Islamic ethics
Outcome	Continuity of Islamic knowledge	Commodification of religious symbols	Dialectical coexistence—tradition as adaptive moral capital

Source: Processed from field data and theoretical synthesis (Sim et al., 2023).

D. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of pesantren mediatization in the digital era demonstrates that pesantren are not static institutions but adaptive socio-religious entities capable of negotiating tradition and modernity. The Xpose Uncensored case by Trans7 and the response of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo reveal that tensions between traditional values and modern media logic create a symbolic dialogue, giving rise to selective modernity:

pesantren adopt aspects of modernity that align with Islamic values while resisting media representations that oversimplify or commodify their traditions. Findings from critical discourse analysis and digital ethnography highlight two main strategies: redefining self-representation through narratives of adab (ethics), ilm (knowledge), and khidmah (service); and developing digital engagement to express pesantren values in visual and interactive formats. This study positions pesantren as active epistemic actors shaping digital public morality and emphasizes the importance of media literacy, culturally sensitive journalism, and further research into digital pesantren culture.

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