

## Content, Commodification, and Controversy: Pesantren as Objects of Attention in the Digital Media Landscape

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### Abstract

*This study examines the representation, production, and contestation surrounding pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) within the digital media ecosystem, particularly on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. The growth of digital platforms has reshaped public understandings of pesantren, from a learning-powered model rooted in scholarly depth and religious authority, to an earning-powered model driven by algorithms, virality, and the logic of the attention economy. Through qualitative content analysis, this study identifies emerging patterns of representation, forms of commodification, and controversies developing in digital spaces. Findings show that pesantren now are presented as fragmented visual and narrative content; as commodities, where santri identities and institutional branding hold market value in the digital ecosystem; and as objects of controversy debated through edited sermon clips, internal drama, and sensational content that potentially triggers misinterpretation. The dynamics of learning powered and earning powered operate simultaneously, creating tensions between traditional pesantren values and digital performativity. These findings suggest that pesantren representation in digital culture reflects not merely a communication phenomenon, but deeper epistemological shifts and power relations between religious institutions and platform-based media. The study recommends strengthening digital literacy grounded in pesantren values and developing ethical religious communication practices so pesantren remain sources of knowledge and moral formation rather than viral commodities.*

**Keywords:** Pesantren; Digital Media; Representation; Commodification

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi, produksi, dan perdebatan seputar pesantren dalam ekosistem media digital, khususnya TikTok, YouTube, dan Instagram. Perkembangan platform digital telah menggeser pemahaman publik tentang pesantren, dari model *learning powered* yang berbasis kedalaman keilmuan dan otoritas keagamaan, menuju *earning powered* yang dikendalikan algoritma, viralitas, serta logika ekonomi atensi. Melalui analisis isi kualitatif, penelitian ini menelusuri pola representasi, bentuk komodifikasi, serta kontroversi yang berkembang di ruang digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pesantren kini hadir sebagai konten visual dan naratif yang terfragmentasi; sebagai komoditas, di mana identitas santri dan citra kelembagaan memiliki nilai jual dalam ekosistem digital; serta sebagai objek kontroversi yang diperdebatkan melalui potongan ceramah, drama internal, dan konten sensasional yang berpotensi memicu misinformasi. Dinamika *learning powered* dan *earning powered* bekerja secara bersamaan, menciptakan ketegangan antara nilai tradisional pesantren dan tuntutan performativitas digital. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa representasi pesantren dalam budaya digital tidak sekadar mencerminkan fenomena komunikasi, melainkan perubahan epistemologis dan relasi kekuasaan antara institusi keagamaan dan teknologi berbasis platform. Penelitian merekomendasikan penguatan literasi digital berbasis nilai pesantren serta pengembangan

Jurnal Kopis: Kajian Penelitian dan Pemikiran Komunikasi Penyiaran Islam

Volume 08, issue 02, bulan Februari tahun 2026

Permanent link for this document (DOI): [10.33367/2qq22h80](https://doi.org/10.33367/2qq22h80)



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praktik komunikasi keagamaan yang etis agar pesantren tetap berfungsi sebagai sumber pengetahuan dan pembentukan akhlak, bukan sekadar komoditas viral.

**Kata Kunci:** Pesantren; Media Digital; Representasi; Komodifikasi

## Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have long held a historically significant position in the development of Indonesian society. From the pre-independence era to the modern day, pesantren have functioned as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge, the formation of moral character, and the preservation of the intellectual traditions of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. This role positions pesantren not merely as educational institutions, but also as spaces where identity, social culture, and strong community networks are shaped. Beyond producing religious scholars and national figures, pesantren have cultivated a vast social ecosystem, encompassing millions of alumni across Indonesia who exert considerable influence on social life. Within Indonesia's plural and diverse society, pesantren also serve as guardians of social stability and key contributors to the dissemination of moderate, inclusive, and nationally oriented Islamic values (Fatmawati & Rifa'i, 2021).

Over the past decade, however, the way the public recognizes and understands pesantren has undergone a profound transformation. Representations of pesantren are no longer formed solely through direct experience or institutional narratives, but have entered the fluid, fast-paced, and algorithm-driven landscape of digital media. This shift is not merely about changes in information distribution channels; it also redefines who holds the authority to shape public perceptions of pesantren. Digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram have become primary sources through which people access information about pesantren, gradually replacing traditional interpersonal networks that once dominated the dissemination of religious knowledge. This development marks a significant transformation in the production and consumption of religious information in Indonesia (Firdaus et al., 2025).

This transformation goes beyond a change in communication channels; it reflects a more fundamental shift in how society interprets pesantren as an institution. The phenomenon is clearly illustrated by several cases occurring during the period of this study. In October 2025, the television program *Xpose Uncensored* on Trans7 aired a one-sided and sensational report on Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo, selectively cutting the context of the santri–kiai relationship and juxtaposing it with misleading narratives about material wealth. The broadcast triggered widespread protests across digital platforms, with the hashtag #BoikotTrans7 appearing in more than 137,000 posts, prompting a response from the Minister of Religious Affairs, Nasaruddin Umar, and leading to an official apology from Trans7 (Tempo, 2025). In February 2025, the wife of a descendant of Pesantren Tebuireng, known as Ning Salma, promoted cosmetic products without official BPOM authorization on Instagram, which went viral and prompted the pesantren to issue a formal statement distancing itself from the activity (*Jakartamu*, February 13, 2025). Meanwhile, in November 2025, a video featuring a pesantren figure from Kediri, Gus Elham Yahya, went viral across social media platforms, generating diverse public interpretations and prompting direct responses from the Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs and the Chairman of PBNU (Akurat, November 14, 2025). These cases illustrate how pesantren are no

longer merely objects of media coverage, but have become arenas of contested meaning within a digitally mediated public sphere.

These developments indicate an important epistemological shift from a *learning-powered* (knowledge-based) model to an *earning-powered* (content-driven) ecosystem. In the learning-powered model, the value of knowledge is determined by intellectual depth, learning processes, and the traditional authority of pesantren. In contrast, within an earning-powered ecosystem, the value of content is shaped by virality, visual appeal, algorithmic distribution, and monetization potential. This shift affects not only how pesantren are represented, but also how religious knowledge itself is valued and consumed by the broader public. In other words, content about pesantren is no longer evaluated based on its intellectual substance, but rather on its performance in terms of impressions and engagement in the digital sphere (Rizky et al., 2025).

Today, a wide range of content about pesantren circulates extensively—from santri humor, sermon excerpts, and daily activities to institutional critiques and dramatic or sensational framing. Much of this content appears in fragmented forms: short clips, decontextualized excerpts, or reframed narratives. As a result, these representations often become partial, contradictory, or even problematic, failing to fully capture the scholarly traditions and ethical values that lie at the core of pesantren. This issue becomes even more significant considering that digital audiences tend to accept such representations as complete portrayals, often without sufficient contextual understanding. This raises a fundamental question: do content creators genuinely act as producers of meaning who understand pesantren values, or are they simply following the logic of platform algorithms that prioritizes speed, entertainment, and engagement (Iskandar, 2023).

At the same time, the media industry increasingly capitalizes on the popularity of pesantren representations as part of the attention economy. Television programs, dramatic documentaries, reality shows, and viral talk shows centered on pesantren demonstrate that these institutions are no longer seen solely as spaces for education and moral development, but also as cultural commodities that can be marketed within the media landscape. This practice places pesantren in an ambiguous position: on one hand, they are recognized as important institutions; on the other, they are treated as exploitable content. This tendency creates friction between the traditional values of pesantren—such as ethical conduct (*adab*), intellectual patience, and long-term learning processes—and the logic of digital media, which emphasizes speed, visualization, and instant impressions (Muzakky et al., 2023).

The commodification of pesantren becomes even more apparent in the way religious symbols associated with these institutions are reconstructed for engagement and monetization. The identity of santri, traditions such as *badrah*, and even the figure of the *kiai* are frequently turned into viral content, often without regard for their underlying context and meaning. This process illustrates how digital market logic gradually reshapes public perceptions of pesantren from spaces of knowledge and moral formation into commodified spectacles designed for rapid consumption (Febrianda & Adiba, 2025).

Debates in digital spaces further reveal an arena of contestation among various actors with differing interests in shaping narratives about pesantren. Traditional authorities, such as *kiai* and pesantren administrators, strive to maintain representations aligned with normative

values, while a new generation of santri content creators introduces more informal communication styles closely tied to popular digital culture. Platform algorithms also function as non-human actors that determine which content gains greater visibility in the digital public sphere. These dynamics result in representations of *pesantren* that are not singular, but rather diverse, layered, and often contradictory within the same digital space (Sari, 2025).

Taken together, these phenomena constitute an important and urgent field of inquiry into how *pesantren* are produced, represented, consumed, and contested in the digital era. The study of *pesantren* representation in digital media is not only relevant to communication studies, but also intersects with issues of knowledge authority, cultural identity construction, and power relations between traditional institutions and platform-based media. This research is expected to contribute to the development of analytical frameworks for understanding the relationship between traditional religious institutions and rapidly evolving digital media ecosystems. Ultimately, this study seeks to examine how content, commodification, and controversy surrounding *pesantren* in digital media reflect a broader paradigm shift in the relationship between society, technology, and religious institutions in Indonesia.

## **Method**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using qualitative content analysis. The selection of this methodological approach is based on the consideration that the research does not focus on numerical measurements, but rather on an in-depth interpretation of patterns of representation, thematic categories, and discursive dynamics emerging from digital content related to *pesantren*. Qualitative content analysis enables the researcher to systematically identify, categorize, and interpret content while taking into account the broader socio-cultural context in which it is embedded (Fadli, 2021).

Primary data were collected from three major digital platforms TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram—over the period from January 2023 to December 2025. A total of 45 content units were analyzed, consisting of 15 items from TikTok, 15 from YouTube, and 15 from Instagram. TikTok content includes short-form videos such as *santri* humor, sermon excerpts, and daily activities within *pesantren*. YouTube content consists of *pesantren* vlogs, mini-documentaries, and religious lectures. Meanwhile, Instagram content includes reels, activity photos, educational carousels, and memes related to *pesantren*. In addition to user-generated content, several television broadcasts and online programs featuring *pesantren* were also analyzed to compare representation patterns in mainstream media.

Data were collected using purposive sampling based on the following four criteria: (1) the content explicitly includes the keywords “*pesantren*,” “*santri*,” or “*mondok*”; (2) the content demonstrates a high level of engagement, defined as a minimum of 10,000 views or 500 likes; (3) the content presents specific forms of representation, such as humor, critique, educational material, or sensationalism; and (4) the content was published within the research period of January 2023 to December 2025. Content that did not meet all four criteria was excluded from the analytical corpus.

Data analysis was conducted in three sequential stages. First, the data reduction stage, in which the researcher sorted and grouped the content into three categories: positive representations (educational and inspirational), neutral representations (everyday informational content), and problematic representations (commodification, sensationalism, or conflict). Second, the thematic coding stage, where each content unit was analyzed based on aspects such as visual representation, narrative and framing, the balance between educational value and entertainment, its alignment with either a learning-powered or earning-powered logic, and the position of knowledge authority reflected in the content (e.g., *keiai*, *santri*, influencers, or content creators). Coding was conducted using a categorization table to ensure consistency in analysis. Third, the interpretation stage, in which the findings were interpreted through the lens of digital communication theory, the attention economy, and media representation studies, in order to understand how *pesantren* are constructed within the digital ecosystem and the extent to which algorithms shape their representation (Rizky et al., 2025).

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by cross-comparing findings across the three platforms, as well as theoretical triangulation by relating the findings to theories of representation, the digital economy, and *pesantren* studies. Systematic data documentation was also carried out to minimize researcher bias. This study has several limitations: the analysis is limited to publicly available content and therefore does not capture the full scope of internal communication dynamics within *pesantren*; it does not measure long-term impacts on public perception; and it does not involve direct interviews with content creators or *pesantren* administrators. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the study's ability to provide a comprehensive overview of *pesantren* representation patterns in the digital sphere.

## Results and Discussion

### Overview of the Analyzed Content

The analysis was conducted on 45 units of digital content from three major platforms TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram—produced between January 2023 and December 2025. The selection of content was based on four criteria: the explicit use of *pesantren*-related keywords, a high level of engagement, diversity in forms of representation, and inclusion within the defined research period.

Each platform demonstrates distinct characteristics in how *pesantren* are represented. TikTok is dominated by entertainment-oriented and highly viral content. YouTube, in contrast, presents longer, more narrative-driven material. Meanwhile, Instagram functions as a space for aesthetic curation that reinforces the institutional image of *pesantren*. The following table summarizes the key characteristics of the analyzed content:

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**Tabel 1. Content Characteristics**

| No | Platform  | Type of Content                                      | Dominant Representation Patterns        | Learning-Powered Value | Earning-Powered Value |
|----|-----------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1  | TikTok    | Santri humor, daily life, sermon excerpts            | Comedic, sensational, everyday life     | Low–Moderate           | Moderate–High         |
| 2  | YouTube   | Pesantren vlogs, documentaries, reactions, lectures  | Educational, informative, reflective    | High                   | Moderate              |
| 3  | Instagram | Reels, activity photos, educational carousels, memes | Inspirational, aesthetic, institutional | Moderate–High          | Low–Moderate          |

### **Pesantren as Content: The Diversification of Representation in Digital Media**

The findings of this study indicate that *pesantren* are now represented in a variety of formats that go beyond a singular narrative as traditional Islamic educational institutions. On TikTok, *pesantren* appear through humorous videos, repackaged sermon excerpts, and spontaneous, light portrayals of *santri* daily life, positioning *pesantren* as part of a fast-paced, consumptive, and entertainment-oriented visual culture. In contrast, YouTube offers longer and more in-depth representations through vlogs, mini-documentaries, and religious studies, presenting *pesantren* as spaces for learning and the development of spiritual values. Instagram, on the other hand, constructs the image of *pesantren* through neat and curated visual aesthetics, positioning them as modern and credible institutions in the eyes of urban audiences.

This diversity of cross-platform representations shows that the image of *pesantren* is no longer singular within the public imagination. Instead, it appears fluid, flexible, and constantly reshaped according to the characteristics and algorithmic logic of each platform, thereby both expanding and complicating public understanding of *pesantren* as multidimensional religious institutions. Differences in representation patterns across platforms also reflect variations in how audiences consume and interpret information about *pesantren*. TikTok users tend to form quick and often superficial first impressions, while YouTube and Instagram users are generally more open to comprehensive and contextual narratives.

These findings highlight the importance of understanding the distinct platform logic of each platform in constructing the meaning of *pesantren* within the contemporary digital public sphere. This dynamic aligns with the view that digital media actively reshape the identity and representation of *pesantren* within an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving platform-based information ecosystem. (Rizky et al., 2025).

### **Pesantren as Content: Diversification of Representation in Digital Media**

The digital representation of *pesantren* reveals an increasingly intensified process of commodification, aligned with the logic of the attention economy. In this context, *santri* identity, religious activities, and institutional images are transformed into assets that can be monetized through algorithmic mechanisms and digital engagement. The identity of *santri* is constructed

performatively as entertaining, aesthetic, or relatable personas, enabling content such as “*santri* humor” or “aesthetic *santri*” to generate high levels of interaction among digital audiences.

Commodification also operates at the institutional level, as illustrated by the case of Ning Salma, who promoted cosmetic products without official authorization from BPOM via Instagram while leveraging her association with the Tebuireng *pesantren* family. This incident prompted the institution to issue an official statement distancing itself from such activities (Jakartamu, 2025).

This phenomenon suggests that religious symbols associated with *pesantren* are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation for the sake of virality and economic gain, often without sufficient ethical consideration. As a result, the commodification process risks reducing the depth of *pesantren* values into mere marketable packaging within the digital content economy. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing that the commodification of cultural identity in social media is a representational strategy strongly shaped by algorithm-driven digital market logic (Febrianda & Adiba, 2025).

### **Pesantren as a Contested Space: Content, Control, and Controversy**

The increasing representation of *pesantren* in the digital sphere has given rise to an arena of contestation among various actors with differing interests in shaping public narratives about *pesantren*. The case of the *Xpose Uncensored* program on Trans7, which covered Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo in October 2025, provides a concrete example of how mainstream media can construct misleading narratives through decontextualization and sensational framing. This coverage triggered a massive wave of protests and prompted the Minister of Religious Affairs to publicly address the issue of preserving the dignity (*muruah*) of *pesantren*.

Similarly, the viral spread of a video featuring Gus Elham Yahya from Kediri in November 2025 illustrates how ambiguous content emerging from the *pesantren* environment can generate diverse interpretations, widespread public reactions, and direct interventions from prominent national religious figures across digital platforms. (Akurat, 2025).

This form of contestation demonstrates that *pesantren* are not merely passive objects of representation, but also arenas of struggles over meaning-making among traditional authorities, content creators, digital audiences, and platform algorithms that simultaneously shape both visibility and public interpretation. The presence of algorithms as autonomous non-human actors in this contestation marks a key distinction from pre-digital dynamics, as platform logic now plays a decisive role in determining which content is amplified and which is marginalized within the digital public sphere.

These findings reinforce the view that digital *dakwah* (Islamic outreach), when not accompanied by adequate media literacy, is highly susceptible to producing distortions of religious meaning within platform-based ecosystems. (Iskandar, 2023).

## **The Dynamics of Learning-Powered vs. Earning-Powered Logics in Pesantren Representation**

The digital representation of *pesantren* is shaped by two logics that operate simultaneously, though not always harmoniously: a *learning-powered* logic oriented toward the depth of religious knowledge, and an *earning-powered* logic that prioritizes virality and content monetization. The learning-powered logic is most evident in sermon content, classical text studies, and educational documentaries on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, where *pesantren* are portrayed as educational institutions that remain relevant and dignified in contemporary contexts.

In contrast, the earning-powered logic is more dominant on TikTok, where staged humor, hyperbolic narratives, and dramatic editing tend to prioritize sensation over intellectual substance. Despite this apparent tension, many content creators successfully integrate both logics, producing content that is simultaneously informative, entertaining, and aligned with *dakwah* values. As such, the relationship between these two logics is better understood as negotiated and productive rather than strictly oppositional.

This dynamic reflects the view that the transformation of *pesantren* in the digital era is not linear, but rather characterized by ongoing creative negotiations between traditional values and the evolving demands of a dynamic digital ecosystem. (Muzakky et al., 2023).

## **Symbolic Tensions and the Long-Term Impacts of Pesantren Representation**

The representation of *pesantren* in digital media generates symbolic tensions between traditional *pesantren* values—such as simplicity, discipline, and obedience—and digital culture, which prioritizes freedom of expression, entertainment, and monetization. However, these tensions often give rise to creative negotiations that produce new forms of religious expression in the digital sphere.

In the long term, the digital representation of *pesantren* carries three key implications. First, it strengthens the image of *pesantren* as modern and transparent institutions. Second, it increases the risk of misinformation arising from sensationalized content produced without sufficient context. Third, it creates new economic opportunities for *santri* and *pesantren* through participation in the digital content creator ecosystem. (Khoiruddin & Fakhrudin, 2026; Labibah, 2026).

Pesantren communication strategies in the digital era need to prioritize a balance between technological adaptation and the preservation of authentic pesantren values, so that these institutions are not fully absorbed into the logic of digital commodification that threatens their intellectual substance. (Sari, 2025). Ultimately, the presence of pesantren within the digital media landscape reflects a profound epistemological shift and complex power relations between traditional religious institutions and platform-based digital ecosystems that increasingly shape the construction of knowledge and identity among Indonesian Muslims. This shift requires pesantren not only to adapt technically, but also to develop ethical and intellectual frameworks at an epistemological level in their participation within digital spaces, without losing the depth of the traditional values that form their foundation. (Firdaus et al., 2025). Thus, *pesantren* require strategies that are not merely reactive but also proactive in building a content ecosystem rooted in *pesantren* values, educating *santri* as creators with strong ethical competence, and critically negotiating with the logic of digital platforms. (Innayah & Gade, 2026; Sabilla & Amous, 2026).

## Conclusion

The study of *pesantren* representation within the digital media landscape reveals significant findings regarding the transformation of public understanding of these institutions. *Pesantren* are no longer perceived merely as closed and hierarchical Islamic educational institutions; rather, they have become objects of attention within platform-based ecosystems that prioritize virality, engagement, and content monetization. This study identifies three main dimensions. First, *pesantren* appear as fragmented and simplified content, where epistemological depth and the ethical values (*adab*) of *pesantren* are often reduced to instant visual consumption. Second, *pesantren* undergo systematic commodification, in which the identity of *santri* and institutional image are exploited as economic assets within an earning-powered logic driven by algorithms and engagement. Third, the representation of *pesantren* frequently generates controversy, stemming from distortions of meaning, decontextualized narratives, and sensational framing by various actors competing to shape public discourse.

These three dimensions operate simultaneously and influence one another, creating a complex dynamic between learning-powered and earning-powered logics within the digital ecosystem. The presence of *pesantren* in digital spaces is not merely a communication phenomenon, but rather a reflection of a profound epistemological shift and complex power relations between traditional religious institutions and evolving platform-based technological ecosystems that increasingly shape the construction of Indonesian Muslim identity. Based on these findings, this study recommends strengthening digital literacy grounded in *pesantren* values, enabling *santri* to become content creators who are both ethically and intellectually competent. Further research involving direct interviews with content creators and *pesantren* administrators is also necessary to deepen understanding of how traditional values are negotiated within the demands of digital platforms. Ultimately, *pesantren* are expected to continue functioning as sources of knowledge, moral formation, and civilization, rather than being reduced to viral commodities within Indonesia's digital media landscape.

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