Kyai's Role As an Educator and Moral Builder In Islamic Education In Pesantren: A Response to the Controversy of Trans7 Broadcast

Farida Nur 'Afifah*
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia
e-mail: faridanurafifah204@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of kyai as a central actor in Islamic education in Islamic boarding schools, especially as educators, moral coaches, and guardians of the moral authority of the ummah in the midst of the challenges of mass media representation. Pesantren as a traditional Islamic educational institution has an important role in the formation of the character, spirituality, and moral values of students. However, in the context of contemporary media, pesantren and kyai figures are often represented simplifying and tend to be negative, thus potentially weakening public trust in the moral authority of pesantren schools. This research explicitly uses the library research method with a qualitative-descriptive approach. Data was obtained through the analysis of scientific literature, official documents, and public statements related to the issue of pesantren representation in the media. The limitation of this study lies in the non-use of direct empirical data from kyai, pesantren communities, and media practitioners, so that the findings produced are conceptual and normative. The scope of the study was limited to the controversy of Trans7 which drew public criticism because it was considered to degrade the values and traditions of the Islamic boarding school. This case is used as an illustrative study to understand the relationship between the mainstream media and Islamic boarding schools. The analysis was carried out using the theoretical framework of moral authority kyai, Islamic moral education, and media representation theory. The results of the study show that kyai plays the role of uswah hasanah, spiritual guide, and director of integral moral education. Disproportionate media representation has the potential to undermine the symbolic legitimacy and moral authority of the kyai.

Keyword: Kyai; Islamic boarding schools; Islamic Education; Mass Media

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren as a unique Islamic educational institution, has long played an important role in developing moral character, intellectual competence, and religious knowledge among Muslims. Within this framework, the kyaias the leader and guardian of the Islamic boarding school—holds a central position as an educator, ethical guide, and spiritual guide. Research shows that kyai has a great influence on the moral formation of students through their authority and knowledge.[1] Through their dual function as primary educators and moral role models, kyai contribute to the development of individuals who are not only intellectually competent but also spiritually and ethically grounded.[2] A study has shown that the role of kyai in maintaining Islamic character has a positive impact on the life satisfaction of Islamic boarding school alumni.[3] However, in the modern era marked by the rapid flow of information and the pervasive influence of mass media pesantren life and the role of kyai face new challenges, both internal and external, including how pesantren is perceived, represented, and communicated to the public. In this context, this research is based on the theoretical framework of kyai moral authority, media representation theory, and cultural communication to analyze the relationship

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[1] Maulida Qurratul Aini, *"The Role of Kyai Leadership in the Management of Islamic Boarding School Education Strategies"*, Leadership: Islamic Education Management Student Journal, vol.1 no.2, 2023, 45.

[2] Didit Ruhdiyanto, et al., *"The Role of Kiai in the Development of Morals of Students at the Pagelaran III Islamic Boarding School"*, JIIP — Scientific Journal of Education, vol.7 no.3, 2024, 2640.

[3] Heri Kurniawan and Amanda Putri Widia, *"Kyai's Role as an Islamic Character Educator on the Life Satisfaction of Islamic Boarding School Alumni in Indonesia"*, AtThullab: Journal of Islamic Studies Students, vol.7 no.1, 2022, 78.

*Corresponding author

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between pesantren, kyai, and mass media. This framework allows for a more systematic analysis of how the meaning of pesantren is shaped, simplified, or twisted in media practice.

One of the recent controversies arose from the Trans7 television program that depicted pesantren life in a way that was widely seen as demeaning to the kyai culture and pesantren. The Central Java Broadcasting Commission (KPID Central Java) expressed regret because the broadcast failed to reflect the diversity and traditions of the Islamic boarding school.[4] Similarly, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) criticized the program for "offending the spiritual atmosphere of the pesantren" and took the case to a plenary session.[5] The Trans7 case was chosen not solely because of its controversial nature, but because it reflects a pattern of structural relations between the mainstream media and traditional religious institutions, where pesantren are often reduced to specific cultural symbols and separated from the complexity of their educational values and practices. Thus, this case is treated as an illustrative study that represents the problem of media-pesantren representation more broadly.

Such depictions go beyond factual representations, turning to generalizations and distortions that undermine the dignity of kyai institutions and Islamic boarding schools.[6] How pesantren and kyai are represented in the public media directly affect their image, legitimacy, and social role. When media portrayals deviate from reality or ignore the traditions of pesantren, they risk fostering public distrust, social tension, and misinterpreting the role of pesantren's role as a center of moral and religious education. However, it is important to note that not all media representations are negative; Several alternative media and digital platforms actually try to present pesantren in a more balanced manner.[7] This study acknowledges the existence of such a spectrum of representations, but specifically focuses the analysis on problematic forms of representation that have a significant impact on public perception.

Therefore, this study responds to contemporary challenges by examining how the role of the kyai as educators and moral guides functions in Islamic education, and how that role is tested by modern media representations—particularly the Trans7 controversy. This study seeks to explore: (1) The role of kyai in Islamic education in Islamic boarding schools, especially in moral development; (2) The response of the pesantren community to media portrayals; and (3) The implications of these portrayals on improving the quality of Islamic education and moral formation in the era of mass media. The scope of this research is expressly limited to the analysis of the relationship between the moral authority of the kyai and the representation of the media, without discussing in depth the internal managerial dynamics of the pesantren.

Understanding the role of kyai in the context of pesantren involves several dimensions: scientific authority and sanad (pedagogical lineage), moral education methods, and integrated character formation systems (akhlakul karimah).[8] In this study, the role of kyai is operationalized as (1) a source of moral authority, (2) an agent of the transmission of Islamic ethical values, and

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[4] Muhammad Hendra Firmansyah & Fadlillah, *"The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools as Moral Formation Institutions"*, SIRAJUDDIN: Journal of Islamic Education Research and Studies, vol.1 n0.1, 2021, 12–13.

[5] KPID Central Java, "KPID Central Java Regrets Trans7 Broadcast About Islamic Boarding School", October 14, 2025. https://kpi.go.id/id/umum/23-berita-daerah/37923-kpid-jateng-sesalkan-tayangan-trans7-soal-pesantren?tmpl=component&print=1&layout=default&page= accessed on October 21, 2025.

[6] Central KPI, "Trans7 Shows Do Not Understand the Sociology of Islamic Boarding Schools in Its Entirety, KPI Don't Just Give a Reprimand", Parlementaria, October 17, 2025. https://jdih.dpr.go.id/berita/detail/id/60274/t/Tayangan%2BTrans7%2BTidak%2BPaham%2BSosiologi%2BPesantren%2Bsecara%2BUtuh%2C%2BKPI%2BJangan%2BSekadar%2BBeri%2BTeguran?utm.com accessed on October 21, 2025.

[7] Ahmad Zaini, "Kyai Authority and the Challenges of Digital Media," *Journal of Da'wah*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2019), pp. 67–69.

[8] Muhammad Hendra Firmansyah & Fadlillah, *"The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools as Moral Formation Institutions"*, SIRAJUDDIN: Journal of Islamic Education Research and Studies, vol.1 n0.1, 2021, 3-4.

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(3) a cultural actor who deals with the construction of media meaning.[9] In the midst of modernization and media exposure, kyai must simultaneously play the role of a leader (muwajjih), educator, moral facilitator, and guardian of pesantren traditions.[10] The study has social and academic relevance, highlighting the importance of reaffirming the role of kyai education while critically evaluating how pesantren respond to external challenges such as media misrepresentation.

Previous studies such as those conducted by Rohmat Mulyana have concluded that kyai plays a central role in shaping the character of students through personal example (uswah), direct advice, and spiritual supervision (muraqabah). However, this research often focuses on internal morale formation and not on external media challenges.[11] A. Halim emphasized that pesantren have adapted their moral education system to modern times while maintaining the traditional authority of kyai.[12] Dewi Yuliana observed that the media often portrays pesantren in a simple or negative way, ignoring its diversity and moral richness.[13] Firmansyah and Fadlillah emphasized the power of Islamic boarding schools in transmitting Islamic moral values through the example of kyai, but without analyzing the response to the media crisis.[14] Ahmad Zaini added that digital media and broadcasting sometimes weaken the authority of the kyai through misinformation and distortion.[15] However, the literature generally does not integrate the analysis of pesantren moral education with the systematic study of media representation, and rarely discusses concrete cases of media controversy as the main object of study. Thus, this study fills the conceptual gap by relating the moral education of the pesantren, kyai authority, and media representation in one analytical framework. The contribution of this research is conceptual and methodological, namely expanding the study of Islamic education with the perspective of media studies and offering an analytical basis for further empirical research on the relationship between pesantren and mass media.

METHOD

This study uses a library research method with a qualitative descriptive approach, which aims to describe and understand the phenomenon comprehensively through content analysis of relevant written sources. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on exploring the meanings, concepts, and normative-conceptual discourses regarding the role of kyai and the representation of Islamic boarding schools, not on empirical measurements of social behavior. The analysis was carried out systematically to explain how the role of kyai as an educator and moral guide in pesantren is discussed in academic literature, as well as how the representation of pesantren in the mass media is criticized from an Islamic and socio-academic perspective.

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[9] Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Pesantren Tradition: A Study on Kyai's Life View* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2011), pp. 55–58. Rohmat Mulyana, "The Role of Kyai in the Formation of Santri Character," *Journal of Islamic Education*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2015), pp. 102–104.

[10] Rodiatul Hasanah, "Kyai Leadership in Islamic Boarding Schools: Strategies for Instilling Religious Values in the Midst of the Modernization Trend", *Ihtirom: Journal of Islamic Education Management,* Vol. 4 No. 1, 2025, 570.

[11] Rohmat Mulyana, *The Role of Kyai in Shaping the Character of Students in Salaf Islamic Boarding Schools*, Tarbiyatuna Journal, Vol. 8 No. 2, 2017, 112–120.

[12] A. Halim, *Moral Education in Islamic Boarding Schools: Strategies and Challenges*, Journal of Islamic Religious Education, Vol. 13 No. 1, 2020, 45–53.

[13] Dewi Yuliana, *Media and the Image of Islamic Boarding Schools: A Critical Analysis of Islamic Boarding School Representation on Television*, Journal of Islamic Communication, Vol. 5 No. 2, 2022, 66–75.

[14] M. Hendra Firmansyah and Fadlillah, *The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools as Moral Formation Institutions*, Sirajuddin: Journal of Islamic Education Research and Studies, Vol. 1 No. 1, 2021, 10–15.

[15] Ahmad Zaini, *Kyai's Legitimacy Crisis in the Digital Era: A Sociological*, Socio-Religious Review, Vol. 9 No. 1, 2023, 23–34.

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The selection of data sources is carried out based on clear and measurable criteria, namely: (1) direct relevance to the topic of pesantren education, kyai authority, and media representation; (2) the academic credibility of the source (scientific books, accredited journals, and official documents of the institution); and (3) temporal linkages to the issues studied, especially the Trans7 controversy. This research does not involve field observation or direct interviews, so it is methodologically limited to document analysis and discourse, including theoretical frameworks, previous research results, and official documents related to the Trans7 case and Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, the focus of the study lies on a conceptual and historical understanding of the role of kyai in Islamic education, as well as a critical assessment of the institutional response to Trans7's broadcasts based on official statements, policy documents, and academic opinions.

Primary data sources include classical Islamic texts (turath), especially Imam al-Ghazali's Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din, which was used to formulate the normative foundations of moral and spiritual education in Islam. To avoid the limitations of a purely normative perspective, the classical text is contextualized with contemporary Islamic educational theory and modern media studies. Additional primary data comes from official statements and documents issued by institutions such as the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI), the Regional Broadcasting Commission (KPID), and the Ministry of Religion regarding the Trans7 broadcast controversy, as well as transcripts of the shows that are used as objects of discourse criticism. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and relevant research that discussed Islamic boarding schools, kyai leadership, media representation theory, and the formation of Islamic morality. Although this study focuses on one media case, namely Trans7, the case is positioned as an illustrative study to understand the pattern of media-pesantren relations, not as a basis for broad generalizations. The methodological limitation of this study lies in the non-use of triangulation methods through field data; However, source triangulation is done by comparing classical texts, academic literature, official documents, and media texts, thereby improving the robustness of analysis and consistency of interpretation. Overall, this methodology allows a critical reading of the role of kyai and the representation of pesantren in the framework of Islamic education and contemporary media discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Kyai's Role in Moral Development in Islamic Boarding Schools

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, kyai represents a central figure who not only functions as the chairman or caretaker of the institution but also as an educator (mu'allim), spiritual guide (*mursyid*), and moral example (*uswah hasanah*) for students (*santri*). The function of the kyai goes far beyond the transmission of religious knowledge; they include the holistic formation of Islamic personality, morality, and character among students.[16] The presence of kyai in the pesantren is similar to the source of living values. Students learn not only through lectures or the study of classical texts (yellow books), but also through direct observation of the daily behavior of the kyai humility, discipline, worship, and social interaction. The behavior of the kyai thus became a model for internalizing Islamic ethics and moral principles in daily life.[17] In this study, the role of kyai is understood mainly through normative and conceptual constructions sourced from Islamic boarding school literature and education. The literature on pesantren education shows that the personal example of kyai is the main mechanism for

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[16] Zakiah Daradjat, *Islamic Education*, (Jakarta: Bumi Aksara, 2004), 97.
[17] Ahmad Tafsir, *Education in Islamic Perspective*, (Bandung: Remaja Rosda Karya, 2006), 54–56.

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internalizing the moral values of students, although this finding is based more on normative and reflective studies than empirical evidence in the field.[18]

One of the characteristics of Islamic education is its emphasis on moral and ethical cultivation (akhlaq) as the ultimate goal. This is reflected in the words of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, *Innama bu'itstu liutammima makarimal akhlaq*. Indeed, I was sent only for the noble and perfect character.[19] In the pesantren environment, moral education (*ta'dib al-akhlaq*) is not treated only as a subject or theoretical discourse but as the soul and spirit of the entire educational system. In this case, kyai plays an important role as a moral caregiver who guides the way of life of students in accordance with Islamic values. Kyai, in this framework, plays the role of a moral authority that directs the orientation of the students' lives according to Islamic values, as emphasized in classical literature and contemporary pesantren education studies.[20] From the perspective of Islamic padagogi, moral development is implemented through several approaches that are uniquely applied by kyai in the pesantren tradition. These findings were formulated based on a synthesis of pesantren literature and classical texts such as *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, which were then contextualized with the study of modern Islamic education, so that the results were conceptual and normative.[21] Exemplary behavior (*uswah hasanah*) Kyai demonstrates moral virtue through personal example, demonstrating discipline, humility, sincerity, and devotion in all aspects of life. Advice and advice (*mau'idzah hasanah*) Kyai provides advice and moral guidance to students both in formal lessons and informal interactions. Spiritual purification (*tazkiyatun nafs*) Kyai leads students in spiritual practices such as dhikr (remembering God), muhasabah (self-reflection), and other acts of contemplation that aim to purify the soul from inner evil. Education in manners (*ta'dib*) Kyai cultivates moral discipline through etiquette and behavior, whether in dormitory life, mosque activities, or study sessions.[22]

Through this approach, kyai has a profound influence on shaping the Islamic character of students instilling respect for teachers and parents, awareness of religious and social responsibilities, consistency in worship, simplicity in lifestyle, and sincerity in service. The goal is not only for students to know what is good but to become good individuals not only cognitively capable but also emotionally and spiritually based.[23] However, because this study did not involve field data or direct interviews, the influence was understood as a theoretical construct that represents the ideal pattern of pesantren education, rather than as a measurable empirical finding. In the digital era, which is characterized by the rapid flow of information, moral formation faces increasingly complex challenges. Unlimited media access, the rise of consumerist culture, and a decline in public role models have made the moral education of students more demanding than ever. In this context, the role of the kyai becomes more crucial not only as a religious teacher but also as a guardian of morality and a defender of Islamic values in the midst of external cultural pressures.[24] Therefore, a deeper understanding and strengthening of the moral-educational role of kyai is essential, especially in the midst of modern challenges of misrepresentation of media and erosion of traditional values. Strengthening this

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[18] Rohmat Mulyana, "The Role of Kyai in the Formation of Santri Character," *Journal of Islamic Education*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2015), 100–103.

[19] HR. Ahmad and Al-Baihaqi, in *Musnad Ahmad* and *Shu'abul Iman*.

[20] Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Pesantren Tradition: A Study on Kyai's Life View* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2011), 54–57.

[21] A. Halim, "Moral Education in Islamic Boarding Schools and the Challenges of Modernity," *Journal of Islamic Religious Education*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2017), 169–172.

[22] Imam Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, Juz III, (Beirut: Darul Fikr, 1992), 135.

[23] M. Hendra Firmansyah and Fadlillah, *The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools as Moral Formation Institutions*, Sirajuddin Journal, Vol. 1 No. 1, 2021, 12–13.

[24] A. Halim, *Moral Education in Islamic Boarding Schools: Strategies and Challenges*, Journal of Islamic Religious Education, Vol. 13 No. 1, 2020, 47.

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role ensures that pesantren continue to be the moral and spiritual fortress of Islamic civilization in Indonesia.

Chronology and Content of Trans7 Broadcast at Life Islamic Boarding School

On October 13, 2025, Trans7 television station aired an episode of its investigative program Xpose Uncensored, featuring segments about life at the Islamic boarding school, specifically at the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School in Kediri.[25] The episode is titled, "Even to Drink Milk, Students Have to Squat Is This Like Living in a Pesantren?" The broadcast included scenes depicting students squatting while receiving milk, giving envelopes to kyai, and the narration of the host who was considered to underestimate or mock the tradition of the Islamic boarding school.[26] The program presents daily activities within the pesantren, but the visual framing emphasizes a feudalistic image depicting students bowing or squatting in front of kyai, giving money, and depicting kyai living in luxury while students live a simple life.[27] The host's narrative took on a provocative tone, raising questions such as, "Why are kyai rich while their students have to squat down and give envelopes?"[28] These scenes and the accompanying commentary were widely criticized for being contextually misleading and unbalanced, failing to provide a deeper explanation of the cultural and religious traditions of the pesantren. As a result, this program creates a common and distorted image of pesantren life.[29]

The segment quickly went viral on social media. The hashtag #BoikotTrans7 (Trans7 Boycott) emerged as a widespread public protest, especially among students, alumni of Islamic boarding schools, and religious communities.[30] On October 14, 2025, various religious organizations and broadcasting regulators issued official responses. The Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPID) of Central Java expressed disappointment by stating that the broadcast violated journalistic ethics and did not respect the tradition of Islamic boarding schools. Similarly, KPID West Java conducted a preliminary investigation and found potential violations of several clauses in the Broadcast Program Standards and Code of Ethics (P3SPS). Furthermore, the National Broadcasting Commission (KPI) announced that the episode had "offended the spiritual integrity of pesantren life" and would be reviewed in a plenary session. In response to widespread criticism, Trans7 publicly apologized between October 14 and 15, 2025, acknowledging the content had caused discomfort and misunderstanding within the

[25] Binti Nikmatur, Chronology of the Trans7 Show Case Considered Hina Kiai and Islamic Boarding School, https://www.malangtimes.com/baca/347600/20251014/060900/kronologi-kasus-tayangan-trans7-yang-dianggap-hina-kiai-dan-pesantren?utm.com, accessed on October 21, 2025.

[26] Abdul Rahman, "Trans7 Admits Mistakes in Shows That Harass Kiai and Islamic Boarding Schools, https://www.jawapos.com/nasional/016701302/trans7-akui-kesalahan-dalam-tayangan-yang-melecehkan-kiai-dan-pesantren?utm.com accessed on October 21, 2025.

[27] Binti Nikmatur, Chronology of the Trans7 Show Case Considered Hina Kiai and Islamic Boarding School, https://www.malangtimes.com/baca/347600/20251014/060900/kronologi-kasus-tayangan-trans7-yang-dianggap-hina-kiai-dan-pesantren?utm.com, accessed on October 21, 2025.

[28] Elok Nuri, "The Chronology of Viral #BoikotTrans7 Hashtags: Its Broadcast Is Considered to Hurt Kiai and Islamic Boarding Schools. https://narasi.tv/read/narasi-daily/kronologi-tagar-boikottrans7-viral-tayangannya-dinilai-mencederai-kiai-dan-pesantren?utm_source=copy_link&utm_medium=share accessed on October 21, 2025.

[29] Tiara Nanda Maharani, "Trans7 Boycott Echoes! This is the Chronology and the Beginning of the Conflict with Lirboyo to Be Widely Criticized by Santri", https://kabarmegapolitan.pikiran-rakyat.com/nasional/pr-1749719880/boikot-trans7-menggema-ini-kronologi-dan-awal-mula-konflik-dengan-lirboyo-hingga-banyak-dikecam-santri?utm.com accessed on October 21, 2025.

[30] Elok Nuri, "The Chronology of Viral #BoikotTrans7 Hashtags: Its Broadcast Is Considered to Hurt Kiai and Islamic Boarding Schools. https://narasi.tv/read/narasi-daily/kronologi-tagar-boikottrans7-viral-tayangannya-dinilai-mencederai-kiai-dan-pesantren?utm_source=copy_link&utm_medium=share accessed on October 21, 2025.

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pesantren community. The controversy surrounding Trans7's broadcasts thus reveals a significant gap between media representation and cultural understanding. What is meant as an exposure to pesantren life is instead a case study in misrepresentation, highlighting the consequences of superficial or sensational institutional depictions of religious institutions in the mass media.

Response of Islamic Boarding Schools and the Community to Trans7

The Xpose Uncensored program that aired on Trans7 on October 13, 2025 triggered a wave of controversy because of its depiction of pesantren life and the figure of kyai. The segment, which featured scenes of students squatting while receiving milk and giving envelopes to kyai, was widely considered misleading and demeaning to the Islamic boarding school tradition that has long been associated with humility, discipline, and respect. Strong reactions emerged from many Islamic boarding schools, especially the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School in Kediri the institution reportedly described in the episode. Religious leaders (kyai) and pesantren guards expressed deep disappointment, arguing that the broadcast had distorted the values of the pesantren and presented it as a symbol of feudalism or unethical behavior. Islamic boarding school organizations and student associations issued open protests, labeling the Trans7 episode as an insult to kyai and a misrepresentation of the actual social reality of pesantren life. Some pesantren warn that such a narrative could erode public trust in the institution of pesantren that for centuries has been the moral and spiritual fortress of the nation.[31]

The essence of the criticism of the pesantren community emphasizes that actions such as squatting in front of kyai are not a gesture of humiliation, but an expression of respect and adab (subtle manners)—an integral element of Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago. Outside the pesantren environment, the broadcast also triggered widespread public anger, especially among pesantren alumni, religious leaders, and the Muslim community in general. Many consider Trans7's coverage to be biased, uninformed, and culturally insensitive. The public response takes several important forms the hashtag #BoikotTrans7 trended on social media as thousands of users protested the episode. Within hours, a video clip of the broadcast went viral, sparking widespread condemnation.[32] Many former students shared their personal experiences online, clarifying that pesantren life as portrayed by Trans7 is far from reality. National religious figures, media scholars, and intellectuals also voiced criticism, describing the program as a form of stigmatization of Islamic educational institutions. The alumni network, especially under Rabithah Ma'ahid Islamiyah (RMI-NU), released an official statement condemning the broadcast and demanding an official and public apology from Trans7.[33]

These reactions collectively show that pesantren are more than just educational institutions; they are cultural and religious identities that are firmly embedded in the spiritual and moral order of Indonesian Muslim society. When pesantren are portrayed disproportionately or disrespectfully, their impact goes beyond the institution—it becomes an insult to the values, traditions, and collective identity of society. This controversy underscores the media's ethical responsibility as a powerful agent of public opinion. The Trans7 case serves as a concrete example of cultural insensitivity and a lack of contextual understanding, showing

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[31] "Lirboyo Caregivers Protest Trans7 Show: This Is Not According to the Facts", *Malang Times*, October 14, 2025.

[32] "Viral #BoikotTrans7 Hashtag, Public Condemns Islamic Boarding School Shows", *Narasi.tv*, October 15, 2025.

[33] "RMI-NU: Trans7 Harasses Kyai and Islamic Boarding School Manners", *NU Online*, October 14, 2025.

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how poorly informed media narratives can generate public discord and undermine long-standing religious institutions.

The Impact of Negative Media Representation on the Image of Kyai and Islamic Boarding Schools

Trans7's broadcast through the Xpose Uncensored program, which aired on October 13, 2025, presented scenes of selected students and kyai who were considered biased and insulting. The episode included visuals of students squatting while receiving milk, handing envelopes to kyai, and the narrative, "kyai is rich while their students suffer," which collectively sparked widespread criticism. Such depictions are considered to have tarnished the image of the pesantren and perpetuated negative stereotypes about one of the oldest Islamic educational traditions in Indonesia.[34] Within the cultural framework of the pesantren, the kyai was much more than a teacher; he was a moral and spiritual leader whose influence extended far into the personal and communal lives of his followers. When the media portrays kyai as an elite figure associated with wealth, privilege, or manipulation, it erodes the moral authority and exemplary character traditionally attached to the position. As emphasized by Nurcholish Madjid, kyai occupies a unique status because of its success in maintaining the morality of society through the power of personal example.[35] As a result, the erosion of the public image of kyai risks triggering a crisis of trust, especially among those who are not familiar with the tradition of Islamic boarding schools.[36] The moral authority of the kyai as the guardian of Islamic values can thus be undermined by misleading public narratives.

It is important to understand that the practice of students bowing or squatting before kyai is not an act of insult, but rather an expression of deep respect and politeness that has long been central to Islamic pedagogy.[37] The implication of Trans7's broadcast that such a movement reflects feudalism is a cultural distortion of the tradition of pesantren. As Imam Zarkasyi explained, pesantren education is not only about the transmission of knowledge but also the internalization of ethics and adab (adab) as a basic dimension of learning.[38] The misrepresentation of this practice in the media not only undermines public understanding but also threatens to erase the moral and spiritual heritage that is typical of traditional Islamic education. In addition, media narratives that are unbalanced or provocatively framed can serve as an instrument of opinion manipulation, shaping public perceptions of religious institutions. As Burhanuddin Hidayat noted, the media uses power to build social reality through the framing process.[39] When a kyai is framed as a distant, elitist, or exploitative figure, such representations can serve to delegitimize traditional religious authority.

The strong reaction from the pesantren community and the wider community reflects the growing resistance to the media's insensitivity to Islamic cultural values. This resistance manifests itself in various forms ranging from #BoikotTrans7 campaigns and official statements by Islamic boarding schools such as Lirboyo, to condemnation by organizations such as PBNU and the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI).[40] This response reveals some underlying

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[34] TV Narasi, "Chronology of Trans7 Shows Considered to Harass Islamic Boarding Schools and Kyai," *narasi.tv*, October 15, 2025.

[35] Nurcholish Madjid, *Pesantren Rooms*, (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1997), 43.

[36] Azyumardi Azra, *Islamic Education: Tradition and Modernization Towards the New Millennium*, (Jakarta: Logos, 1999), 109.

[37] Imam Zarkasyi, *The Paradigm of Islamic Boarding School Education*, (Yogyakarta: IRD Press, 2011), 65.

[38] Imam Zarkasyi, *The Paradigm of Islamic Boarding School Education*, (Yogyakarta: IRD Press, 2011), 65.

[39] Burhanuddin Hidayat, *Framing Media in Religious Conflict*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Siswa, 2015), 55–56.

[40] KPI, "KPID Central Java Regrets Trans7 Broadcast on Islamic Boarding School," *kpi.go.id*, October 15, 2025.

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realities the pesantren community feels degraded culturally and religiously. There is a growing polarization between religious groups and secular media institutions, which, if left unchecked, could further burden social cohesion. This incident serves as a critical reflection on the need to improve media literacy in Islamic boarding schools. As stated by Ahmad Subchi, pesantren must be proactive in producing their own narratives through alternative media platforms to ensure that their identities and values are accurately represented.[41] By engaging constructively with the media, pesantren can protect their moral legitimacy and reaffirm their position as vital cultural institutions in contemporary Indonesia.

The Relevance of Kyai's Role as a Guardian of Morality in the Media Era

Social life in the modern media era especially in the context of digital broadcasting and television has introduced new dynamics in shaping public opinion, including the perception of religious institutions such as Islamic boarding schools and figures such as kyai. In this evolving landscape, the role of the kyai as the guardian of morality not only remains relevant but increasingly critical, given the relentless flow of information that often deviates from Islamic ethics and local cultural values. Historically, kyai has not only been a religious instructor but also a moral exemplar whose behavior, speech, and actions have become a model for the wider community. In the pesantren education system, kyai functions as a core transmitter of knowledge and moral cultivation. In the midst of widespread moral degradation due to uncontrolled media consumption, the presence of kyai as a moral compass is indispensable. He plays a strategic role in guiding the public to discern reliable information, to apply ethical wisdom in digital engagement, and to practice tabayyun the Islamic verification principle before disseminating information to others.

In the era of social media and mass communication, kyai can no longer be limited to the pulpit or traditional religious meetings. As Ahmad Subchi emphasized, their role must be expanded to become media educators who maintain public literacy in evaluating news, narratives, and broadcasts.[42] This relevance becomes even more evident when the media begins to portray pesantren negatively, as exemplified by the Trans7 controversy. Therefore, kyai is expected to respond with a combination of intellectual calmness and firmness, defending the values of pesantren as well as educating the public about the true nature of Islamic traditions. In addition, they must develop alternative narratives through digital platforms such as social media, YouTube channels, and online discussion forums so that Islamic boarding schools and teachings are not only defined through external or distorted perspectives.

From the point of view of cultural communication theory, modern media has the power to replace traditional values with homogeneous global popular culture. In this context, kyai functions as a guardian of culture, protecting the Islamic heritage of the archipelago from the infiltration of values that are not in accordance with Islamic ethics and norms. As a moral guardian, kyai acts as a cultural filter, ensuring that the tradition of pesantren survives in the midst of modernization without losing its spiritual depth.[43] Kyai also preserved the sacredness of the teacher-student relationship (*ta'dzim lil-'alim*) in an era dominated by instant knowledge and "information without authority." In essence, the mission of kyai is to revive the spirit of adab (ethics) and akhlaq (morality) as the essence of education prioritizing moral perfection over mere intellectual or technological mastery. While the media can threaten the image of pesantren

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[41] Ahmad Subchi, "Digitalization of Islamic Boarding Schools and the Challenge of Representation," *Journal of Islamic Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2020), 77.

[42] Ahmad Subchi, "Digitalization of Islamic Boarding Schools and the Challenge of Representation," *Journal of Islamic Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2020), 76–78.

[43] Nurcholish Madjid, *Pesantren Rooms: A Portrait of Travel*, (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1997), 41–43.

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when abused, it simultaneously offers new opportunities for da'wah (Islamic outreach) and moral influence on a broader scale.[44] Challenges such as negative framing of religion, religious misinformation, and Islamophobic content can be effectively addressed through several strategic efforts Kyai's active participation in media platforms, both as credible sources and as content creators who articulate Islamic perspectives with contextual sensitivity. Collaborative engagement between Islamic boarding schools and Muslim journalists to promote ethical, balanced, and culturally based reporting. The integration of digital literacy education into the pesantren curriculum to empower students and alumni as agents of digital transformation rooted in Islamic ethics. Through these measures, kyai can reaffirm their enduring role as moral educators and cultural leaders, ensuring that pesantren remain a bastion of ethical and spiritual integrity amid the shifting tide of modern media culture.

Implications of Improving the Quality of Islamic Education and Moral Development in Islamic Boarding Schools in the Era of Mass Media

As a traditional Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools are currently facing significant challenges in the era of mass and digital media. The rapid flow of information, the tendency of certain media to perpetuate negative representations, and the increasing use of social media among students demand substantial adaptation in the pesantren education system especially in the realm of moral cultivation and teaching quality. Therefore, several crucial implications must be addressed to strengthen the integrity and relevance of Islamic education and moral formation in this new era. First, there must be a deliberate integration of media literacy into the pesantren curriculum. In contemporary society, mass media has become an inseparable part of daily life, including for students. Thus, pesantren must respond proactively by instilling media awareness and critical literacy in their educational framework. This allows students not only to interpret religious texts but also to evaluate and analyze the authenticity of information circulating in various forms of media. As Ahmad Subchi pointed out, pesantren must expand their curriculum beyond the classical Islamic text (yellow book) to foster students' ability to assess, criticize, and clarify the flow of digital information.[45] Such integration can help prevent students from becoming victims of provocations, misinformation, and hoaxes that are contrary to Islamic ethical principles.

Second, the role of kyai and santri in media-based da'wah must be strengthened. In the digital era, da'wah is no longer limited to the pulpit but extends to various online platforms. This requires kyai and santri to acquire digital communication skills that allow them to disseminate Islamic values as a religion of mercy (rahmatan lil 'alamin). According to Imam Zarkasyi, pesantren have a huge potential to nurture agents of social transformation through moral education and ethical da'wah.[46] Therefore, training programs should be developed to equip students with the ability to produce Islamic content such as videos, articles, and podcasts that reflect religious values and local cultural wisdom. Thus, pesantren can build counter-narratives to challenge and correct negative media portrayals. Third, pesantren must foster contextual moral education that is in harmony with the social reality of modern students. In the digital age, morality goes beyond real-world interactions to the virtual world. Thus, moral development must include three important dimensions: (1) ethical communication in the social media space, (2) wisdom against misleading information, and (3) manners (politeness) in

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[44] Hery Santoso, "Kyai and the Media: Repositioning Ulama in the Information Society," *Journal of Islamic Da'wah and Communication*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2018), 112–113.

[45] Ahmad Subchi, "Digitalization of Islamic Boarding Schools and the Challenge of Representation," *Journal of Islamic Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2020), 76–77.

[46] Imam Zarkasyi, *The Paradigm of Islamic Boarding School Education*, (Yogyakarta: IRD Press, 2011), 63–64.

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handling disagreements in digital public forums. As Zakiah Daradjat notes, Islamic moral education is not static; it develops with social and temporal contexts.[47] Therefore, pesantren must design character education modules that resonate with the lifestyle and challenges of the digital generation.

Fourth, Islamic boarding schools must carry out strategic collaborations with media institutions and academics. Such partnerships are essential to counteract negative portrayals and improve the quality of Islamic education. Collaboration between Islamic boarding schools, Islamic media, journalists, scholars, and civil society organizations can help build authentic and positive narratives about pesantren life. In addition, Islamic boarding schools should develop alternative media platforms rooted in Islamic values and create ethical reporting guidelines that uphold religious and cultural sensitivity. As Burhanuddin Hidayat emphasized, the media can function as a strategic partner in da'wah when it is directed to educational goals rather than sensational goals.[48] In short, the evolution of mass and digital media forces pesantren to adopt a constructive and adaptive approach. Through the integration of media literacy, digital da'wah competencies, contextual moral education, and institutional collaboration, pesantren can preserve their core identity as centers of Islamic learning and moral formation, while engaging effectively with the realities of the contemporary information landscape. These measures ensure that pesantren remains a beacon of ethical and spiritual guidance amid global information and cultural currents.

CONCLUSION

Based on results, this study shows that disproportionate media representation has the potential to reduce the meaning of pesantren and weaken the symbolic legitimacy of kyai in the eyes of non-pesantren public. However, this conclusion is limited by the methodological character of the research that uses literature studies and focuses on one media case, so that it does not reflect the overall pattern of national media representation or the diversity of the internal responses of pesantren empirically. Thus, the findings of this study are more appropriately understood as a theoretical reflection on the risk of distortion of the meaning of pesantren in popular media practice. The main implication of this research for Islamic education is the importance of reaffirming the role of kyai as a moral-cultural actor that not only functions in the internal space of the Islamic boarding school, but also deals with the construction of meaning in the public space. In the context of media studies, this research contributes by expanding the discourse on the representation of traditional religious institutions, especially Islamic boarding schools, which has been studied more from the perspective of internal education than from the relationship with the mass media.

The recommendations for strengthening media literacy in this study are understood as a strategic step that is conceptual. Implementively, media literacy can be directed to: (1) the integration of digital ethics and media analysis in the pesantren curriculum; (2) critical training for students to read and respond to media content; and (3) strengthening the capacity of Islamic boarding schools in building public communication based on Islamic values. Collaboration with the media also needs to be designed contextually, through cultural dialogue and journalist education about pesantren traditions, not just a reactive relationship to controversy. Finally, this research opens up space for more empirical and comparative follow-up studies, involving various types of pesantren and diverse methodological approaches. Thus, this study does not offer a final generalization, but rather a preliminary framework to understand the complex

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[47] Zakiah Daradjat, *Islamic Education*, (Jakarta: Bumi Aksara, 2004), 94–95.
[48] Burhanuddin Hidayat, *Framing Media in Religious Conflict*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Siswa, 2015), 56–58.

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relationship between kyai, pesantren, and media in the dynamics of contemporary Islamic education.

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